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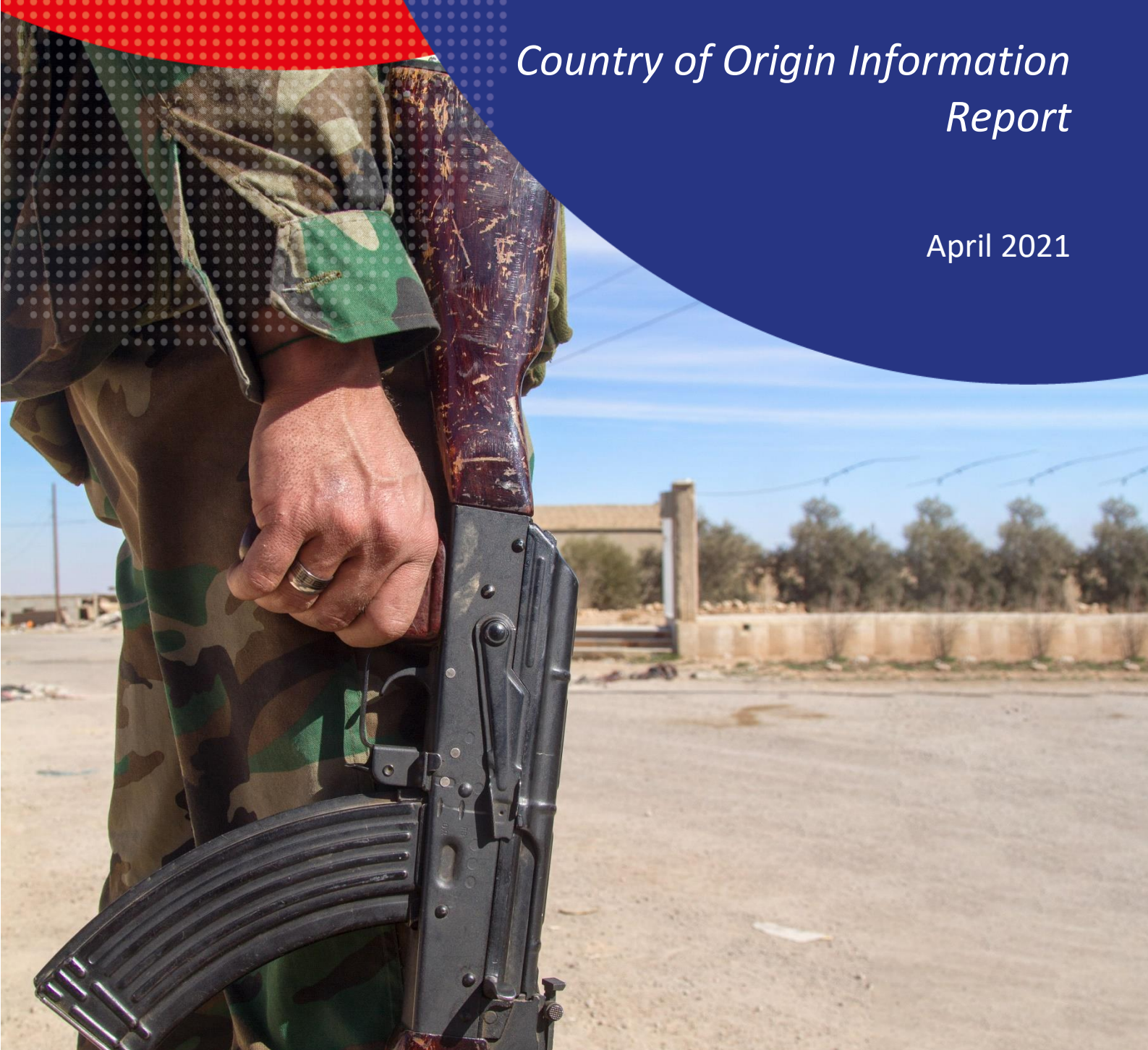
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Syria

Military service

*Country of Origin Information
Report*

April 2021



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Syrian army soldier with an assault rifle.

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The Netherlands, Office for Country Information and Language Analysis, Ministry of Justice
(OCILA)

It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019).¹ The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

‘Refugee’, ‘risk’ and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The drafting of this report was finalised on 22 March 2021. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

¹ The 2019 EASO COI Report Methodology can be downloaded from the EASO COI Portal https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2019_EASO_COI_Report_Methodology.pdf

Glossary and abbreviations

Abbrev.	Explanation
COAR	Center for Operational Analysis and Research
Col	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
FIS	Finnish Immigration Service
GoS	Government of Syria
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), or Daesh
NDF	National Defence Forces
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
SACD	Syrian Association for Citizens Dignity



Military service	Military service ² is used broadly to cover both military service and reserve service in the SAA.
Conscientious objection	Conscientious objection to military service is an objection to such service which ‘derives from principles and reasons of conscience, including profound convictions, arising from religious, moral, ethical, humanitarian or similar motives’. ³
Conscript	A conscript is a Syrian male, above the age of 18, currently serving his military service in the SAA. ⁴
Reservist	A reservist ⁵ is a Syrian soldier currently serving his reserve duty in the SAA. Reservists have previously completed their mandatory military service in Syria, but have been called up for reserve service in the SAA. ⁶
Draft evader	A draft evader ⁷ is a Syrian male, above the age of 18, who has avoided being drafted into the SAA either by hiding from the Syrian authorities or by fleeing Syria. ⁸
Deserter	A deserter ⁹ is a former SAA soldier (e.g. a conscript, a non-commissioned officer (corporal or sergeant) or an officer) who has left his post or unit in the SAA and is thus no longer in active military service. ¹⁰
Defector	A defector is a former SAA soldier who has left the SAA and defected to an armed opposition group in Syria. ¹¹

² See UNHCR’s definition of military service here: UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection No. 10: Claims to Refugee Status related to Military Service within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 3 December 2013, [url](#), p. 2

³ UN Commission on Human Rights, Resolution 1998/77, “Conscientious Objection to Military Service”, E/CN.4/RES/1998/77, 22 April 1998, [url](#)

⁴ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#); Syria Report, Syria’s security sector: A legal handbook”, February 2019, [url](#), p. 138

⁵ See UNHCR’s definition of reservist here: UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection No. 10: Claims to Refugee Status related to Military Service within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 3 December 2013, [url](#), p. 2

⁶ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#); Syria Report, Syria’s security sector: A legal handbook”, February 2019, [url](#), p. 138

⁷ See UNHCR’s definition of draft evasion here: UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection No. 10: Claims to Refugee Status related to Military Service within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 3 December 2013, [url](#), p. 1

⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁹ See UNHCR’s definition of desertion here: UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection No. 10: Claims to Refugee Status related to Military Service within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 3 December 2013, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 7

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information regarding the military service in the Syrian Arab Army - the formal land forces of the national Syrian Armed forces - for international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular for use in updating EASO's country guidance development on Syria.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)¹² and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).¹³

Methodology

The report contains information on the topic of military service in the Syrian Arab Army focusing primarily on recent trends, with updated information on 2020 and 2021 where available. The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 5 March 2021. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process, until 22 March 2021.

The terms of reference (ToR) of this report were defined by EASO based on discussions held and input received from COI experts in the EASO COI specialist network on Syria and from policy experts in EU+ countries¹⁴ within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria. This report was drafted for the purpose of developing analysis of particular profiles with regard to qualification for refugee status.

ToR for this report can be found in [Annex II](#) of this report.

Quality control

In line with the EASO COI Report Methodology, a peer review was performed by COI researchers from the departments listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

Sources

This report is based on desk research of public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources. In addition to the paper-based and electronic sources that were consulted, EASO researchers conducted extensive interviews with the following sources:

- Suhail Al-Ghazi, Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. In addition to being the non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, he is also a member of Verify-Syria fact checking platform. His research focuses on the military and security situation of Syria as well as the socioeconomic situation in government-held areas.
- Sara Kayyali, Syria researcher, Human Rights Watch. Sara Kayyali is a Syria researcher in the Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch, where she researches human rights and international humanitarian law violations in Syria.
- An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria. The source preferred anonymity for the sake of discretion and their personal and organisational safety.

¹² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

¹³ EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴ All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland



The report also draws from the Danish Immigration Service COI report on military service in the Syrian Arab Army (May 2020)¹⁵, based on interviews with sources in Istanbul and Beirut, as well as additional consulted sources via Skype in the USA, Germany, England, France and Turkey.

Structure and use of the report

The report is structured in line with the Terms of Reference. The first chapter provides a short background into the topic of military service during the current conflict in Syria. The second chapter provides an overview of the provisions of the military service law and its implementation in practice, looking specifically at the Syrian Arab Army's current recruitment practices, methods of recruitment, factors influencing deployment of conscripts and reservists, and demobilisation. The third chapter covers the legal exemptions and deferrals from military service and their enforcement in practice. The final chapter addresses the legal and practical implications of draft evasion, desertion and defection.

¹⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#)

Map



Map 1: Syrian Arab Republic, © United Nations¹⁶

¹⁶ Syrian Arab Republic, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

1. Background

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, one of the Government of Syria's (GoS) main issues was to provide manpower in order to face armed rebel groups.¹⁷ During the conflict, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) lost many soldiers to casualties, draft evading, desertion and defection.¹⁸

Some men have fled the country because they do not want to perform military service for fear that they will be killed in combat, while others have defected from the army or avoided military service out of political conviction and in opposition to the GoS.¹⁹ Throughout the conflict, sources reported that the GoS viewed the activities of wide categories of individuals as political dissent, including draft evaders²⁰ and defectors.²¹

The evasion of conscription has been reported as one of the main reasons for young men over the age of 18 having fled Syria. Furthermore, 'it is also one of the primary reasons why they cannot return', according to a Forced Migration Review report.²² The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that 75 % of Syrians hope to return one day, but the military conscription that they 'cannot avoid' makes them reluctant to do so.²³ A 2020 research by the Syrian Association for Citizens Dignity (SACD)²⁴ based on a survey of 1 100 Syrians inside and outside the country, found that 84 % of respondents who wish to return want to see compulsory military recruitment either cancelled or suspended for at least five years, while 58 % of respondents flagged cancelling compulsory recruitment as a necessary condition for return.²⁵

¹⁷ Quartz, Syria's young men face an impossible choice, 14 December 2016, [url](#)

¹⁸ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission Report, Syria: Military service, national defence forces, armed groups supporting Syrian regime and armed opposition, Helsinki, 23 August 2016, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁹ TIMEP, Brief: Legislative Decree No.18 – Military Service Amnesty, 6 December 2018, [url](#)

²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15; See UNHCR interviews with several sources between May and October 2017: UNHCR, International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic; Update V, 3 November 2017, [url](#), pp. 39-40, footnote 224; Al Jazeera, Why is the world afraid of young refugee men?, 20 June 2016, [url](#)

²¹ AI, Between Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearances in Syria, November 2015, [url](#), p. 7; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/19/69], 22 February 2012, [url](#), p. 13

²² The authors of the report had the position of Humanitarian Field Coordinator in Syria (Ahmad Araman) and Program Officer at the US Institute of Peace in Iraq (Shaza Loutfi), respectively. Araman, A. and Loutfi, S., Return to Syria after evading conscription, Forced Migration Review, October 2019, [url](#), p. 52; see also Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, 21 February 2019, [url](#), p. 21

²³ UNHCR, Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees, Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria, March 2019, [url](#), p. 2

²⁴ SACD is a civil-rights movement aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons. For more information see [url](#)

²⁵ SACD, We are Syria, July 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 35

2. Military service and official conscription

2.1 Military and reserve service

Male citizens between the ages of 18 and 42 are required by law to perform their military service.²⁶ According to Law No 35/2011, which amended the military conscription Law No 30 of 2007, military service lasts between 18 and 21 months.²⁷ Women may perform military service voluntarily.²⁸ Palestinians with permanent residency in Syria are also subject to conscription and usually serve in the ranks of the SAA-affiliated Palestine Liberation Army (PLA).²⁹ Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are also subjected to military service and recruited like other Syrians.³⁰

Those who have completed the compulsory military service and have not exceeded the maximum draft age remain reservists and can be called for reserve duty up to the age of 42.³¹ Career soldiers can be called to service up to the age bracket of 48 to 62, depending on the rank.³²

Interviewees from a Basmeh & Zeitooneh³³ February 2021 report stated that since the start of the conflict conscripts who have finished their military service, as well as career soldiers have been called to re-enlist as reservists.³⁴ According to independent Syria researcher Suhail Al-Ghazi, reservists are called to active service when the army has a shortage of manpower, but also as a method of controlling the population. Certain qualifications of the reservist such as being a tank operator, mechanic or previous deployment following military training influence whether the SAA will call a reservist into active service.³⁵ Christopher Kozak of the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) stated in a 2017 interview with UNHCR that the age limit for reserve service can be increased if the person possesses specific qualifications such as for example doctors, tank drivers, air force personnel, artillery specialists and combat equipment engineers.³⁶

²⁶ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁷ Syrian Arab Republic, Parliament of Syria (The), al-Marsoum at-Tashree'ee 35 li-am 2011 [Legislative Decree 35 for the year 2011], 1 June 2011, [url](#)

²⁸ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 6; Atlantic (The), Assad is desperate for soldiers, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

³⁰ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 26

³¹ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

³² Syria Report, Syria's security sector: "A legal handbook", February 2019, [url](#), p. 110

³³ Basmeh & Zeitooneh is a Lebanon-based NGO established in 2012 specialised in providing assistance to Syrian refugees. For more information see [url](#).

³⁴ Basmeh & Zeitooneh interviewed a sample of 12 men who served in the SAA, 13 men of military age who did not serve in the SAA and 8 women whose direct family members were affected by military conscription. Respondents were residing in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and the Netherlands. Basmeh & Zeitooneh, A Sword of Damocles. Compulsory Military Service in Syria and its Consequences on the Lives of Syrians, February 2021, [url](#), p. 9

³⁵ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

³⁶ Christopher Kozak, ISW, 15 February 2017 interview with UNHCR, UNHCR, Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Syria; "Illegal Exit" from Syria and Related Issues for Determining the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Syria, February 2017, [url](#), p. 22 footnote 118

2.2 Conscientious objectors

According to Article 46 of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, 'compulsory military service shall be a sacred duty and is regulated by a law for all men over the age of 18 years.'³⁷

Syria does not legally recognise the right to conscientious objection neither does it provide for substitute or alternative service.³⁸ The US Department of State (USDOS) reported in its 2020 annual report on religious freedom in Syria that exemption from military service based on conscientious objection is granted to Christian and Muslim religious leaders, although Muslim religious leaders are required to pay an exemption fee.³⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that the GoS does not recognise the right to conscientious objection. Currently, those wishing to evade military service will either try to get an exemption, go to areas outside the GoS control or leave the country.⁴⁰

Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed that the GoS views the act of conscientious objection as high treason. The source assessed that conscientious objectors would face imprisonment or the death penalty. He gave the opinion that their family members would also 'be at risk of being detained or killed'.⁴¹

Draft evaders and deserters interviewed by Basmeh & Zeitooneh for a February 2021 report motivated their decision to evade the military service or desert by not wanting to take part in what they considered 'has increasingly become a "cleansing" of opposition views by the GoS, with the SAA as its main apparatus for doing so'.⁴²

In the first years of the conflict, there were reports of arbitrary arrests⁴³, enforced disappearances⁴⁴, torture and extra-judicial executions of soldiers who refused orders from superiors, such as to shoot at protesters.⁴⁵ The Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office - a pro-opposition NGO that compiles statistics on victims of the Syria civil war from Dar'a governorate - claimed, without providing details, that reconciled⁴⁶ fighters from Dar'a which took part in the GoS offensive on Idlib in the beginning of 2020, were executed by field commanders for refusing to take part in the battle.⁴⁷ In an interview with the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) in February 2020, Mohammed Sarmini of the think-tank Jusoor for Studies⁴⁸ assessed that SAA conscripts or reservists who refuse to participate in the fighting in Idlib are pressured and threatened and those who continue to refuse 'may be imprisoned'.⁴⁹

³⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/34/64], 2 February 2017, [url](#), p. 34

³⁸ UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations: Syrian Arab Republic, 9 August 2005, [url](#), p. 4

³⁹ USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 10 June 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁴⁰ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

⁴¹ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

⁴² Basmeh & Zeitooneh, A Sword of Damocles. Compulsory Military Service in Syria and its Consequences on the Lives of Syrians, February 2021, [url](#), p. 11

⁴³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 16 August 2012, A/HRC/21/50, [url](#), p. 14

⁴⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 12 February 2014, [url](#), p. 38

⁴⁵ HRW, "By All Means Necessary!" Individual and Command Responsibility for Crimes Against Humanity in Syria, 15 December 2011, [url](#), pp. 67-68; Guardian (The), Syrian soldiers shot for refusing to fire on protesters, 12 April 2011, [url](#)

⁴⁶ Detailed information on the so-called reconciliation agreements and impact on the population is available in the EASO COI Report: [Syria - Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#)

⁴⁷ Al Monitor, Some Syrian regime fighters defecting when forced to front lines, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁸ Mohammed Sarmini was also a former political advisor of the president of Syrian Interim Government, the opposition's political body. See [url](#)

⁴⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 69

2.3 Recruitment practices of conscripts and reservists to the SAA during the reporting period

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the cessation of major military operations in Syria in early 2020, military recruitment drives by the SAA reportedly slowed down.⁵⁰ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, who was interviewed by EASO in 2021 for this report, stated however, that the SAA is regularly calling on new conscripts and reservists.⁵¹ As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, in March 2020 the GoS suspended the conscription for eligible men for one month until 22 April 2020.⁵²

In an interview with EASO in February 2021, an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria assessed that conscription drives are taking place across the entire GoS-held territory.⁵³ Other sources stated that SAA recruitment focuses on Alawites and areas loyal to the GoS.⁵⁴ According to a research published in August 2020 by the Arab Reform Initiative⁵⁵, between 65 % and 75 % of Alawites aged 18 to 30 and between 35 % and 40 % of Alawites aged 30 to 40 are serving in the SAA as conscripts, reserves or volunteers. The same source reported that some Alawites served in the SAA for more than seven years.⁵⁶

Two experts interviewed by DIS in January and February 2020 assessed however, that there is less pressure and less conscription of Alawites from Latakia, Tartous, Hama and Homs governorates into the SAA as compared to previous years.⁵⁷ Syria researcher Gregory Waters⁵⁸ assumed that the GoS focused more on recruiting soldiers from reconciled areas than Alawites.⁵⁹ Tawazun⁶⁰ stated that the SAA also 'draws on select Sunni clans in the north and east to form ad hoc units'.⁶¹

Suhail Al-Ghazi indicated in January 2021 that the SAA concentrated its recruiting on young men between 18 and 30 years old and those with specific qualifications which are needed, such as tanks mechanics or engineers.⁶² Other sources explained that the GoS mainly recruits men up to 27 years of age, while older people are more likely to invoke exceptions.⁶³

On 10 January 2021, the GoS issued a circular ordering the reduction of the SAA's combat readiness and overall mobilisation to pre-2012 levels. The order provides for combat unit readiness to be reduced from 100 to 80 % within ground and naval units, 66 to 33 % in administrative units and from 80 to 50 % in their affiliated military units. The circular also provided for a decrease in ration

⁵⁰ COAR, Syria in 2021. Forecast for a Protracted Crisis, 28 January 2021, [url](#)

⁵¹ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

⁵² Syrian Observer (The), Syrian Government Delays Sending Conscripts to Military Service, 19 March 2020, [url](#)

⁵³ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021; Tawazun, Syria Country Profile, 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁵ The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa. See [url](#)

⁵⁶ Lazkani, A., No Homeland, No Future: Alawite Youth As the Backbone of the Assad Regime, Arab Reform Initiative, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 48, 57

⁵⁸ Gregory Waters is a researcher focusing on Syrian security forces, primarily using open-source research. For more information, see [url](#)

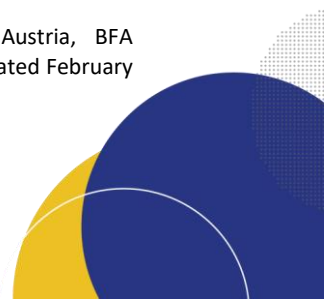
⁵⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 48

⁶⁰ Tawazun is an independent platform which analyses defence sectors in Arab countries. For more information, see [url](#)

⁶¹ Tawazun, Syria Country Profile, 2020, [url](#)

⁶² Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

⁶³ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 7; Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria [Updated February 2021], p. 43, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation



allocations to military units.⁶⁴ In practice, the scaling down would be achieved by providing more leave days for soldiers.⁶⁵ The measure was interpreted by sources as a means by which the GoS aims to cut down costs in a period when major military operations have been frozen and the economic situation has deteriorated.⁶⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi assumed that soldiers will still have to get permission from their commanding officer for leave which generally entails paying a bribe.⁶⁷ Information on the implementation in practice of the circular could not be found.

For information on conscription practices of the SAA prior to 2020, see Chapter 2 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Targeting of Individuals \(March 2020\)](#)

2.3.1 Recruitment in SAA-affiliated forces

According to the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR)⁶⁸, reporting in September 2020, military recruitment was being carried out also by pro-GoS militias or Iranian and Russian-backed factions formally under the command of the SAA. In Dar'a governorate, the Russian-backed 5th Corps and the Iranian-backed 4th Division of the SAA were reported to be the main units conducting military recruitment, particularly attracting military defectors, deserters and former opposition fighters from reconciled areas who fear arrest, detention, or forced military conscription in the SAA.⁶⁹ These units reportedly provide better incentives for conscripts such as higher salaries than in the SAA⁷⁰, as well as issuing of documents that remove restrictions on movement and provide protection against criminal charges or outstanding security threats by the GoS.⁷¹

March 2020 estimates from a research published by the European University Institute put the number of recruits from eastern Dar'a in the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps at around 1 600, including 900 former rebels.⁷² By June 2020, at least 7 000 military defectors, deserters, and draft evaders from Dar'a registered their names at the headquarters of the 8th Brigade.⁷³ In July 2020, the Iranian-backed 4th Division of the SAA opened several recruitment centres in the towns of Mzeireb and Zayzun, western Dar'a governorate attracting the enrolment of around 2 700 recruits, mostly deserters from the SAA and former rebels, according to COAR reporting.⁷⁴ Research from 2020 conducted by the European

⁶⁴ Enab Baladi, Syrian regime lowers army readiness to pre-2012 levels, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵ Enab Baladi, Syrian regime lowers army readiness to pre-2012 levels, 18 January 2021, [url](#); COAR, Syria Update, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁶ COAR, Syria Update, 25 January 2021, [url](#); Enab Baladi, What pressed Syrian regime into scaling down combat readiness?, 20 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁷ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021, 3 February 2021

⁶⁸ COAR is a social enterprise that provides research and analysis related to the conflict in Syria as part of an EU-funded project. For more information see [url](#)

⁶⁹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

⁷⁰ Al-Jabassini, A., Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria, European University Institute, 7 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18; COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9

⁷¹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 8-9; Enab Baladi, Syria's Daraa.. attempts to abort role of central committee militarily and socially, 17 June 2020, [url](#)

⁷² Al-Jabassini, A., Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria, European University Institute, 7 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁷³ Al-Jabassini, A., Is Ahmad al-Oda winning the "hearts and minds" of Daraa's people?, MEI, 22 June 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), p. 9

University Institute indicated that the Lebanese Hezbollah has also recruited around 300 former rebels from Dara's into its ranks.⁷⁵

Recruitment in other pro-government militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) was reported to take place in Sweida governorate in 2020.⁷⁶ Fabrice Balanche⁷⁷ assessed in a February 2020 interview with DIS, that recruitment in the NDF is done on a voluntary basis and is often motivated by economic reasons.⁷⁸ Other sources interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service (FIS) during a 2018 fact-finding mission to Beirut and Damascus similarly assessed that recruitment in the NDF is generally voluntary.⁷⁹

While those serving in pro-government forces have reportedly been promised that they would be exempted from compulsory military service, there have been reports of cases where former reconciled fighters serving in the 5th Corps in Dar'a governorate were included on the lists of men wanted for military service by GoS.⁸⁰

2.3.2 Conscription of Druze

Throughout the conflict, the Druze of Sweida governorate largely managed to resist compulsory and reserve conscription in the SAA.⁸¹ The neutrality of the Druze at the start of the conflict contributed to the cessation of compulsory and reserve recruitment by the GoS forces.⁸² Amnesty International (AI) stated that inside Sweida, the Druze are 'protected through an agreement with the government from forced conscription'.⁸³ Instead, the Druze have maintained well-organised neighbourhood militias⁸⁴ and NDF units.⁸⁵

Since mid-2018, the GoS and its allies were increasingly pressuring Sweida to resolve the issue of the Druze youths absconding from their military service.⁸⁶ According to an estimation made by a human rights activist from Sweida who was interviewed in May 2019 for a European University Institute research, around 50 000 individuals were reportedly wanted for military service and a large number of them joined local militias and gangs in order to ensure salaries, power and protection.⁸⁷ The

⁷⁵ Al-Jabassini, A., Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria, European University Institute, 7 April 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁷⁶ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁷⁷ Dr. Fabrice Balanche is an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2, is an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute specialising in Lebanon and Syria since the 1990s. His expertise on Syria focuses on political geography, conflict and sectarian issues. For more information see [url](#)

⁷⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 58

⁷⁹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 16-17

⁸⁰ COAR, Syria Update: June 20 – June 26 2019, 26 June 2019, [url](#)

⁸¹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8; al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 9; Syria Untold, Men evading military service in southern Syria's Suwayda feel 'trapped', 9 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸² Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸³ AI, Syria: Peaceful protesters detained in Sweida must be released immediately, 24 June 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁴ Arab Weekly, Rising discontent in Syria's Daraa, Sweida reflects simmering woes, 16 February 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁵ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁸⁶ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁸⁷ Al-Lababidi, M., The Druze of Sweida: the Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts, 28 August 2019, [url](#), p. 9

independent online media platform Syria Untold also advanced the figure of 50 000 men wanted for military service in Sweida in a January 2020 article.⁸⁸

Reporting from 2020 indicated that Druze were increasingly joining Iranian-backed NDF units. In the town of Qarraya, south-western Sweida, the NDF recruited 450 primarily Druze fighters as a response to local tensions between the Druze and the Russian-backed 5th Corps. In late 2019, Russia successfully recruited Druze fighters to serve as mercenaries in Libya, mainly due to the high salaries offered (ranging from USD 800 to USD 1 500 per month). By September 2020, the Druze leadership opposed the recruitment drives and largely managed to prevent further recruits departing to Libya.⁸⁹ In a 2021 interview with EASO, Sara Kayyali of Human Rights Watch stated that there are attempts by the SAA to recruit in Sweida governorate, but these are often resisted by the local community.⁹⁰

In June 2020, AI noted that Druze are only protected from conscription by the SAA inside Sweida and many do not leave the province out of fear of being forcibly conscripted.⁹¹ According to a source from the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)⁹² interviewed by DIS in February-March 2020, Druze conscripts in the SAA serve only in Sweida and will not be required to take part in active fighting.⁹³

2.3.3 Prevalence of SAA conscription in SDF-controlled areas

In SDF-controlled areas, the SAA has a presence in Hasaka, Qamishli, Manbij and Tal Tamr.⁹⁴ The US Defense Intelligence Agency estimated in a November 2020 report, that the SAA had between 4 000 and 10 000 troops deployed in north-east Syria, between the cities of Manbij (Aleppo governorate) and Tal Tamr (Hasaka governorate).⁹⁵

The GoS has not yet reintroduced compulsory military service in the SDF-controlled areas in north-east Syria due to a lack of administrative authority, according to several sources interviewed by DIS between January and February 2020.⁹⁶ According to an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria interviewed by EASO in January 2021, the SAA does not carry out conscription campaigns in SDF-controlled areas.⁹⁷

Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed in January 2021 that in SDF-controlled areas recruitment to the SAA is done on a voluntary basis. The SAA does not carry out conscription campaigns in the SDF-controlled areas and those who do not want to be recruited are able to avoid it by staying and moving outside the areas that the SAA controls.⁹⁸ Other sources interviewed by DIS in 2020 stated that recruitment to the SAA did take place in SDF-controlled areas but on a voluntary basis.⁹⁹

The US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed in a US Department of Defense report covering the period between July and September 2020 that the GoS 'has increased its local recruitment efforts to

⁸⁸ Syria Untold, Men evading military service in southern Syria's Suwayda feel 'trapped', 9 January 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁹ COAR, The Syrian economy at war. Armed group mobilization as livelihood and protection strategy, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁹⁰ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

⁹¹ AI, Syria: Peaceful protesters detained in Sweida must be released immediately, 24 June 2020, [url](#)

⁹² The SNHR is, according to its website, 'an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization'. It documents human rights violations in Syria. For more information, see SNHR, About us, n.d., [url](#)

⁹³ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 88

⁹⁴ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

⁹⁵ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 63

⁹⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 10

⁹⁷ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 26 January 2021

⁹⁸ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

⁹⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 10-11

supplement existing units in north-eastern Syria', without providing further details on the nature of recruitment.¹⁰⁰

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of World Health Organisation (WHO) medical shipments delivered in April 2020 to north-east Syria were destined for use in the Qamishli National Hospital which is under GoS control.¹⁰¹ According to Syria researchers Elizabeth Tsurkov¹⁰² and Qussai Jukhadar¹⁰³, this measure will deter many individuals, including those wanted for military service, to seek medical care out of fear of arrest and forced conscription.¹⁰⁴

According to a source interviewed by EASO in January 2021, the SAA does not conscript stateless Kurds (Ajanibs and Maktumeen). Those who are granted Syrian citizenship and are born after 1992, are eligible for conscription in the SAA.¹⁰⁵

For information on conscription to the SAA in SDF-controlled areas prior to 2020, see Chapter 2 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Targeting of Individuals \(March 2020\)](#)

2.3.4 Prevalence of recruitment of males under 18 and over 42 years

Sources interviewed by EASO for this report in February 2021 stated that they are not aware of any current cases of recruitment of males under 18 or over 42 years old in the SAA.¹⁰⁶

In previous years, sources reported that men in their late 40s and early 50s were being forced to join the SAA.¹⁰⁷ Several sources interviewed by DIS in January and February 2020 reported that they had not received information of any cases of recruitment of people over 42 years of age, while some stated that they did not have knowledge of such cases of recruitment that took place after 2016¹⁰⁸ and 2017¹⁰⁹, respectively. According to Gregory Waters however, he had heard unconfirmed accounts of conscription of over-42-year-old returnees from Lebanon and Jordan as reservists.¹¹⁰ SNHR mentioned a case of a person from northern Homs governorate who was forcibly conscripted in early 2019 as a reservist after reaching the age of 42. The person was later killed in battle in Hama governorate in January 2020.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁰ USDOD, Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the US Congress, July 1, 2020–September 30, 2020, 3 November 2020, [url](#), p. 63

¹⁰¹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 06, 17 April 2020, [url](#), p. 6

¹⁰² Elizabeth Tsurkov is a researcher who focuses on Syria and Iraq. She is a Research Fellow at the Forum for Regional Thinking and a doctoral student at Princeton University's politics department. For more information see: [url](#)

¹⁰³ Qussai Jukhadar is a Syrian researcher based in Turkey and guest contributor at Middle East Institute. For more information see: [url](#)

¹⁰⁴ Tsurkov, E. and Jukhadar, Q., Ravaged by war, Syria's health care system is utterly unprepared for a pandemic, Middle East Institute, 23 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 26 January 2021

¹⁰⁶ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

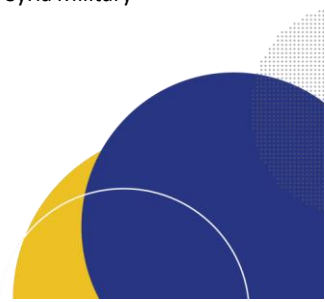
¹⁰⁷ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 6; Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, August 2017, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁰⁸ DIS interview with Mohammad Sarmini, Jusoor for Studies, 18 February 2020, see Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 69

¹⁰⁹ DIS interview with Navvar Shaban, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 18 February 2020. See Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 72

¹¹⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 48

¹¹¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 19



All sources interviewed by DIS in January and February 2020 stated that they have not received information that the SAA had been recruiting men under the age of 18.¹¹² Other sources, however, reported child recruitment and use in GoS forces and affiliated militias during the reporting period. In interviews carried out with DIS between January and March 2020, Fabrice Balanche and SNHR stated that the NDF recruits and uses men under the age of 18.¹¹³ Reporting on the period between April 2019 and March 2020, USDOS stated that the ‘government and pro-Syrian regime-affiliated militias continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers’, specifically identifying the Lebanese Hezbollah and the NDF as forcibly recruiting children.¹¹⁴ The UN Commission of Inquiry in the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) stated in a January 2020 report that it received reports of young boys assessed to be no older than 13 years who were manning GoS and affiliated militias checkpoints in Hama governorate.¹¹⁵

An administrative order issued on 6 February 2019 ended the retention and recall for reserve military service for men born in or before 1981, specifically the following categories: non-commissioned officers, draftees who were not discharged after serving their conscription period and enrolled civil reservists.¹¹⁶ While some sources stated that men born in or before 1981 were not called for reserve service duty following the entry into force of the administrative order¹¹⁷, several other sources documented cases where reservists up to or above the age of 40 were either called up for reserve duty or were still serving as reservists.¹¹⁸ Information on how prevalent the call for reserve service of those up to or above 40 years could not be found.

For information on the prevalence of recruitment of males under 18 and over 42 years to the SAA prior to 2020, see Chapter 2 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria – Targeting of Individuals \(March 2020\)](#)

2.4 Methods of recruiting of conscripts and reservists to the SAA

When new recruits are called up, the GoS sends out military service notifications the houses of men who have reached the age of military service, asking them to register for military service. The names of the men called up for military service are recorded in a central database which is accessed by officers at checkpoints and at the border.¹¹⁹

During 2020, sources noted that men of military age deliberately avoided leaving their houses¹²⁰, passing through checkpoints¹²¹ or interacting with state institutions¹²², out of fear of being forcibly conscripted.

Those passing through checkpoints may be arrested for not having completed their military service.¹²³ Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed in a January 2021 interview with EASO that checkpoints are usually connected

¹¹² Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 18

¹¹³ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 58, 89

¹¹⁴ USDOS, 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Syria, 25 June 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, “They have erased the dreams of my children”: children’s rights in the Syrian Arab Republic; Conference Room Paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/CRP.6], 13 January 2020, [url](#), p. 11 para. 35

¹¹⁶ SANA, القيادة العامة للجيش تستبعد الاحتياطيين المدعويين (غير الملتحقين) من مواليد 1981 وما قبل من دعوات الاحتياط [The General Army Command excludes called up reservists born in 1981 and earlier], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 19; EASO interview with an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, 18 February 2021

¹¹⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 19-20

¹¹⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 11

¹²⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹²¹ PHR, Obstruction and Denial: Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 26

¹²² TNH, No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria’s civil documentation crisis, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

¹²³ PHR, Obstruction and Denial: Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 25

to the wanted lists. Draft evaders screened at checkpoints would be arrested and transferred to the military police. Some might be able to bribe the military police and evade being conscripted.¹²⁴

Corruption at checkpoints is widespread and sometimes those passing through are pressured to pay bribes to not be forcibly recruited.¹²⁵ In Quneitra governorate, over 60 incidents of extortion at checkpoints were documented by Syrians for Truth & Justice¹²⁶ in the period between August 2019 and March 2020, including of men of military age which evaded mandatory or reserve military service.¹²⁷ In Deir Ez Zor governorate, pro-GoS militias were reported to extort young men at checkpoints on the threat of military conscription.¹²⁸ In northern rural Homs, the military police sets up random and unpredictable road checks, including for catching draft evaders.¹²⁹

Several sources indicated that men of military age who have not completed their compulsory military service or reserve duty restrict their freedom of movement out of fear of forced conscription.¹³⁰ For the period between July 2019 and January 2020, the CoI noted that men eligible for conscription in retaken areas such as Eastern Ghouta (Rural Damascus) were not leaving their homes or travelling out of fear of being conscripted in the SAA.¹³¹ A January 2021 joint NGO research report¹³² cited a confidential assessment carried out in Douma, Eastern Ghouta which 'observed that a disproportional number of women, children and elderly men were moving around the city, suggesting men of conscription age were either conscripted, displaced, or in hiding'.¹³³

Conscription took place also when men wanted for military service interacted with state institutions¹³⁴ such as registering a marriage, renewing documents¹³⁵, or seeking treatment at hospitals.¹³⁶ Those who do not have proof of military service can be arrested for evading conscription.¹³⁷ Cases of arrests in 2019 and 2020 were reported at Dar'a National Hospital¹³⁸ and at hospitals in Damascus.¹³⁹ Interviewees from Dar'a for a European University Institute research stated that the threat of military

¹²⁴ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹²⁵ An international humanitarian organisation, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

¹²⁶ Syrians for Truth & Justice is an NGO documenting human rights violations in Syria. See [url](#)

¹²⁷ STJ, Populace Enraged over Blackmail at Syrian Checkpoints in Quneitra, 31 March 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁸ Interviews conducted in January 2019. International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 20

¹²⁹ Enab Baladi, Fear of forced military conscription looms over northern rural Homs again, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁰ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020, [url](#), p. 17; NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level, January 2021, pp. 18-19; private document held on file; Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, European University Institute, June 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹³¹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹³² The report represents the joint work of different organizations, including international NGOs, Syrian NGOs and human rights organisations. It draws on existing publicly available as well as limited distribution data and research reports, including previously unpublished data held by organisations, shared and cross-analysed for the first time. It was complemented by key informant interviews. NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file

¹³³ NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021, p. 23; private document held on file

¹³⁴ TNH, No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria's civil documentation crisis, 30 July 2020, [url](#);

¹³⁵ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹³⁶ Tsurkov, E. and Jukhadar, Q., Ravaged by war, Syria's health care system is utterly unprepared for a pandemic, Middle East Institute, 23 April 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷ PHR, Obstruction and Denial: Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 26

¹³⁸ PHR, Obstruction and Denial: Health System Disparities and COVID-19 in Daraa, Syria, December 2020, [url](#), p. 26

¹³⁹ Sawt Al-Aasima, مصيدة الشبان والمشافى طبية خجولة، [Douma: Medical services are shy, and hospitals trap young men], 8 July 2019, [url](#)

conscription at checkpoints keeps them staying at home and seeking informal jobs.¹⁴⁰ In January 2021, a Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) researcher assessed that those who are wanted for mandatory military service 'may be hesitant to visit public health centers' to access the vaccine for COVID-19 for fear of being conscripted.¹⁴¹

Two sources interviewed by DIS in early 2020 noted that the SAA carried out recruitment in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs).¹⁴² After the GoS recaptured Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus in May 2018, men of military service age were put in displacement camps and conscripted to the SAA directly from these detention centres. Around 7 000 IDPs who were wanted for mandatory or reserve military service were either conscripted in the SAA or joined affiliated forces such as the 5th Corps and the Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁴³

In an interview conducted with EASO in January 2021, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that the SAA does not currently carry out house raids to arrest draft evaders.¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria mentioned that had received information from residents of Dar'a who claimed that authorities conduct house raids and pressure families to recruit men wanted for compulsory military service.¹⁴⁵

While some oral sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020 assumed that, especially in former opposition-held areas (e.g. Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Dar'a and Homs), recruitment by means of house raids is still taking place, others reported that the GoS was largely refraining from doing so in order to avoid renewed uprisings.¹⁴⁶

During the reference period, publicly available sources have reported on cases of recruitment through house raids. In December 2019, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)¹⁴⁷ reported on raids carried out by the intelligence services in Douma city which led to the arrest of about 10 young men wanted for military service.¹⁴⁸ House raids carried out by the military police to arrest evaders of military service were reported to have taken place in January 2020 in northern rural Homs.¹⁴⁹ House raids carried out by security forces were reported in Eastern Ghouta in March 2020, reportedly to arrest those wanted for reserve military service and security issues.¹⁵⁰ In August 2020, SOHR reported that GoS forces were carrying out campaigns of arrests of men wanted for military conscriptions in Deir Ez Zor city, Aleppo, Hama, Rural Damascus governorates and Dar'a countryside.¹⁵¹

In February 2021, the pro-opposition website Sowt Al-Asima reported that patrols belonging to the military police and the Military Security intelligence branch screened and arrested young men wanted for compulsory and reserve military service while they were queuing to buy bread in Eastern Ghouta. The source also mentioned that in 2020 it documented 39 security campaigns in Damascus and Rural

¹⁴⁰ Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, European University Institute, June 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁴¹ Syria Direct, Syria's COVID-19 vaccine is expected by April, but fair access is not guaranteed, 14 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴² Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 51, 54

¹⁴³ MEI/Etana, Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 7-9

¹⁴⁴ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁴⁵ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

¹⁴⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁴⁷ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) is a UK-based independent network that reports on human rights violations in Syria. For more information see [url](#)

¹⁴⁸ SOHR, For the purpose of conscription, the regime's security services carry out a new campaign of raids and arrests in the Eastern Ghouta of Damascus, 14 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ Enab Baladi, Fear of forced military conscription looms over northern rural Homs again, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰ Enab Baladi, After two years of settlement agreement in Eastern Ghouta... home raids and arrests despite Coronavirus lockdowns, 24 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵¹ SOHR, Military conscription | Regime forces step up arrests of young recruits, 6 August 2020, [url](#)

Damascus which led to at least 694 men being forcibly conscripted in the SAA.¹⁵² SOHR also reported in February 2021 on the arrest of 57 men wanted for military service by the military police at bread bakeries queues in Eastern Ghouta, Rural Damascus.¹⁵³

2.5 Deployment of conscripts and reservists to the front

2.5.1 Deployment of conscripts

Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020, stated that the deployment of SAA soldiers to the front is being done indiscriminately, independent of their qualifications, ethno-religious background, area of origin or combat experience.¹⁵⁴ In an interview with EASO conducted in January 2021, Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed however, that SAA deployment to the frontlines is dependent on the soldier's warfare experience and the army's need for manpower. He further stated that the SAA uses in active fighting the most experienced soldiers which were conscripted in the first years of the conflict and relies on experienced units such as the Russian-backed 25th Division (Tiger Forces), the 4th Division, the Republican Guard, Special Forces and 2nd Division for offensive operations. If the SAA's need for manpower increases, conscripts serving in the pro-GoS militias and those coming from former opposition-held areas will also be sent to the frontlines to participate in active fighting.¹⁵⁵ According to a Human Rights Watch report which documented the GoS offensive on Idlib from April 2019 to March 2020, the main GoS units involved in the offensive included the 4th and 5th Corps, the 25th Division (Tiger Forces), the Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds and the NDF.¹⁵⁶

A source interviewed by EASO assumed that due to the concentration of military activity in north-west Syria, the likelihood of conscripts being sent to the Idlib front is high. The source had anecdotal information on reconciled fighters who participated in active fighting on the Idlib front.¹⁵⁷ Sara Kayyali of Human Rights Watch stated that draft evaders from former opposition-held areas were deployed to frontlines to fight ISIL in 2020.¹⁵⁸ During the military operations carried out by GoS in 2019 and early 2020, fresh recruits including draft evaders and persons from former opposition-held areas participated in active fighting in parts of Idlib, Hama and Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁵⁹

While Suhail Al-Ghazi stated in January 2021 that recruits undergo a period of six months of training before they are deployed¹⁶⁰, reporting from March 2020 indicated that draft evaders from former opposition-held areas in Dar'a and Rural Damascus were sent to the frontlines either directly¹⁶¹ or within two months after their conscription, with minimal or no combat training.¹⁶² Six of 12 former SAA soldiers interviewed for a February 2021 research assessed that the military training received prior to being deployed to the frontlines was not adequate, pointing to the short duration of the

¹⁵² Syrian Observer (The), Regime Intelligence Target Eastern Ghouta Bakery Queues, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵³ SOHR, While waiting outside bread bakeries | Regime security services arrest 57 young men in eastern Ghouta for mandatory conscription, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 13

¹⁵⁵ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁵⁶ HRW, "Targeting Life in Idlib"; Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, October 2020, [url](#), p. 136

¹⁵⁷ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

¹⁵⁸ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

¹⁵⁹ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021; SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁶⁰ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁶¹ Syria Direct, As losses mount in Idlib, Damascus sends conscripts from "reconciled" areas to the front, 4 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶² Al Monitor, Some Syrian regime fighters defecting when forced to front lines, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

training and lack of specialisation.¹⁶³ An analysis by ISW dating March 2021, stated that GoS forces fighting ISIL cells in the Central Syrian Desert are made up of ‘ill-trained hired or conscripted troops’.¹⁶⁴

In an interview with UNHCR conducted in March 2020, Sara Kayyali of Human Rights Watch assessed that conscripts originating from former opposition-held areas were likely to be viewed by the GoS as holding anti-government opinion. Professor Dr Ugur Umit Üngör¹⁶⁵ similarly assessed in correspondence with UNHCR dating April 2020 that Sunnis originating from former opposition-held areas such as Eastern Ghouta are perceived as disloyal to the army. The source further stated that they would receive a harsher treatment once recruited such as being sent the frontlines with minimal training as a form of punishment, being subjected to physical training that would amount to torture and in some cases being executed.¹⁶⁶

In early 2020, conscripts and reservists from the so-called reconciled areas of Rural Damascus (Douma city) were reportedly sent to the frontlines in Idlib once the SAA’s need for manpower grew. Those who evaded conscription and were arrested at checkpoints, were reportedly sent directly to the frontlines.¹⁶⁷

In March 2020, Al Monitor reported on the desertion of recent conscripts and soldiers in the SAA originally from Dar’a, Quneitra and Rural Damascus governorates for fear of being sent to the frontlines and the reportedly large number of casualties among new conscripts serving in the SAA. Some reconciled fighters interviewed by Al Monitor claimed that hundreds of those originating from Dar’a were being sent to the frontlines in Idlib, in some cases two months after their conscription and without receiving any combat training.¹⁶⁸

In March 2020, Turkey’s military operation against GoS forces in Idlib dubbed Operation Spring Shield reportedly led to hundreds of GoS soldiers being killed, who were reportedly replaced by the SAA ‘dispatching policeman and underage conscripts’.¹⁶⁹

A July 2020 research published by SADC stated that men from Dar’a perceived as being anti-GoS are reportedly forcibly recruited and sent to the frontlines.¹⁷⁰ The source further stated that ‘forced recruits from Daraa were far more likely to die at the front than other recruits in regime’s army, as they were pushed to the fiercest front lines against battle-hardened opponents. There were also reports that they were executed.’¹⁷¹ Interviewees from a February 2021 report claimed that reconciled fighters conscripted in the SAA were ‘disproportionately sent to the frontlines after being conscripted in the SAA, as a form of punishment for their anti-regime activities.’¹⁷² Horan Free League, an opposition-affiliated media organisation, stated that 76 conscripts from Dar’a governorate were killed in 2020 in military operations which took place in different governorates.¹⁷³

¹⁶³ Basmeh & Zeitooneh, A Sword of Damocles. Compulsory Military Service in Syria and its Consequences on the Lives of Syrians, February 2021, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁶⁴ Kahan, E., ISIS Poised for a Ramadan Surge in Syria, ISW, 9 March 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵ Ugur Umit Üngör is professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, the Netherlands. See [url](#)

¹⁶⁶ UNHCR, Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR’s Country Guidance on Syria, 7 May 2020, [url](#), p. 9, footnotes 33 and 36

¹⁶⁷ Syria Direct, As losses mount in Idlib, Damascus sends conscripts from “reconciled” areas to the front, 4 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ Al Monitor, Some Syrian regime fighters defecting when forced to front lines, 11 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶⁹ Lister, C., The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit, MEI, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰ SADC, “Reconciliation agreement” in Daraa: Insecurity, continued repression and collective punishment, 10 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷¹ SADC, “Reconciliation agreement” in Daraa: Insecurity, continued repression and collective punishment, 10 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷² Basmeh & Zeitooneh, A Sword of Damocles. Compulsory Military Service in Syria and its Consequences on the Lives of Syrians, February 2021, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁷³ Horan Free League, Human Rights Report: Death Reap in Daraa 2020, 8 January 2021, [url](#), p. 11

A research conducted on pro-GoS Facebook pages which document deaths among the SAA and allied forces in 2020¹⁷⁴ revealed that around half of all fatalities incurred by GoS forces in January and February 2020 were of men originating in the core loyalist governorates of Latakia, Tartous, Hama, and Homs, particularly from areas with a high concentration of Alawites. The source noted however, that deaths of reconciled fighters serving in the GoS forces are rarely if at all acknowledged in the 'martyrdom reporting'.¹⁷⁵ The Alawite community is reported to have lost one third of their men of military age in the current conflict.¹⁷⁶

For the year 2020, over 60 % of all GoS forces fatalities were recorded on the north-west front (Latakia, west Aleppo, Idlib, north Hama governorates). Around 30 % of all GoS fatalities recorded in 2020 came from majority Alawite and Ismaili communities in the loyalist areas of Latakia, Tartous, and Hama. From July to December 2020, the central Syria front against ISIL (Deir Ez Zor, east Homs, south Raqq, south Aleppo governorates) became the deadliest front for GoS forces. Fatalities among GoS forces originated mainly from Homs governorate (14 % of all GoS casualties in 2020). For around 20 % of GoS fatalities recorded in 2020 the governorate of origin of the soldiers killed was not indicated, but the researchers assessed that almost half of them came from Deir Ez Zor, Raqq and Homs governorates.¹⁷⁷

2.5.2 Deployment of reservists

Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020, stated that reservists are also deployed to the frontlines, although in considerably lower numbers compared to conscripts.¹⁷⁸ Basmeh & Zeitooneh assessed in a February 2021 report that because of GoS' need for manpower, enlisting as a reservist 'equates to actively serving'.¹⁷⁹ In January 2021, Suhail Al-Ghazi noted however, that deployment of reservists is influenced by the army's need for manpower, if they possess certain qualifications needed by the SAA and if they are considered loyal by the GoS. The source further stated that in the conflict hotspots in north-west Syria and those against ISIL, the SAA does not rely on reservists.¹⁸⁰

Among the GoS casualties recorded in January 2020, research indicated that there were young and old soldiers, inexperienced and experienced alike. The research also mentioned the deaths of a 37-year-old reservist and an 18-year-old serving in the ranks of Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ The source monitored casualties reported by SAA on various social media platforms. The findings provide only a partial picture of the military operations and associated casualties. It does not provide a comprehensive number of Syrians killed in combat. Schoenborn, T. and Waters, G., Tracking the Military Losses of the Syrian Civil War: January 2020, International Review, 5 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ Schoenborn, T. and Waters, G., Tracking the Military Losses of the Syrian Civil War: January 2020, International Review, 5 February 2020, [url](#); Schoenborn, T. and Waters, G., Tracking the Military Losses of the Syrian Civil War: February 2020, International Review, 12 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶ Mohamad, N., As Discontent Grows in Syria, Assad Struggles to Retain Support of Alawites, New Lines Institute, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷ Schoenborn, T. and Waters, G., The Military Casualties of the Syrian Civil War in 2020, International Review, 18 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁷⁹ Basmeh & Zeitooneh, A Sword of Damocles. Compulsory Military Service in Syria and its Consequences on the Lives of Syrians, February 2021, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁸⁰ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁸¹ Schoenborn, T. and Waters, G., Tracking the Military Losses of the Syrian Civil War: January 2020, International Review, 5 February 2020, [url](#)



Bribery of high-ranking SAA officers for avoiding deployment to frontlines or military service altogether is reportedly common.¹⁸² Reservists also pay bribes to avoid being sent to the frontlines.¹⁸³

2.6 Discharge of conscripts and reservists serving in the SAA

Since the outbreak of the conflict, most conscripts have not been discharged even after their compulsory military service had been fulfilled, and had to continue their service.¹⁸⁴ Until January 2018, only a few serving in the military since 2011 were demobilised.¹⁸⁵ Many men continue to perform their military service beyond the compulsory period.¹⁸⁶ Two sources interviewed by DIS in early 2020 noted that by paying a bribe some men, while officially still enrolled as conscripts in the SAA, are allowed in practice to stay at home and avoid military service.¹⁸⁷

In 2018, the GoS began to discharge the oldest classes of recruits who have been in service since 2010.¹⁸⁸ According to a humanitarian organisation working in Syria which was interviewed by DIS in February 2020, Palestinian units within the SAA have been discharging conscripts who have served for a period of four to five years.¹⁸⁹

Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that in 2020, the SAA discharged those who have served in the army for over seven years, those who reached a specific age (38) or military rank. There have not been major demobilisation orders for conscripts who joined the SAA after 2013.¹⁹⁰

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi reporting in January 2021, reservists have been gradually demobilised in the last two years. The discharge focused on reservists who served for more than five years.¹⁹¹ The same source noted in an interview with DIS in 2020 that while reservists serving in infantry and logistics units have been discharged on a regular basis since 2012, those serving in armoured divisions were kept in service for one or two years. Most reservists originating from former opposition-held areas were discharged after a couple of months.¹⁹²

On 29 March 2020, two administrative orders were issued, ending the retention and recall of reserve officers who have completed three years or more of actual backup service until the date of 1 April 2020. It also discharged non-commissioned officers, as well as military personnel who completed reserve service of seven years or more. The implementation date of the order was 7 April 2020.¹⁹³ A June 2020 research noted that soldiers demobilised in March 2020 after completing nine years of service have not been begun receiving the monthly retirement stipend (SYP 35 000 or just over USD 14) entitled to them for one year.¹⁹⁴

On 18 November 2020, two administrative decrees were issued that ended military service for the following class of reservists: officers who will have served as reservists for two or more years by

¹⁸² Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 14; Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁸³ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, 13 February 2020, [url](#), p. 20; Atlantic (The), Assad is desperate for soldiers, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁸⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁸⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁸⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁸⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 86

¹⁹⁰ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁹¹ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁹² Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁹³ Enab Baladi, Syrian soldiers desperate for demobilization after retention in regime's armed forces, 14 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ Tsurkov, E., Syria's Economic Meltdown, Center for Global Policy, June 2020, [url](#), p. 8

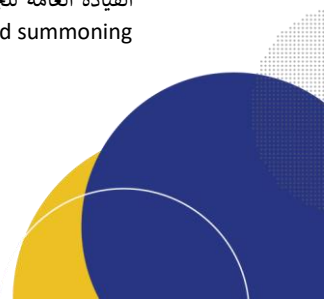
January 2021; non-commissioned officers who have served as reservists for more than seven and a half years; non-commissioned officers born in 1982 and who served as reservists for more than two years. The implementation date of the decrees was 1 February 2021.¹⁹⁵

Information on how the circulars on discharge have been implemented in 2020-2021 could not be found among the sources consulted with in the time constraints of this report.

In January 2021, the Syrian Ministry of Administrative Development announced that 10 076 demobilised soldiers and reservists had passed exams to enter top tier public service jobs. In February 2021, an additional 18 000 demobilised soldiers and reservists passed the exams for lower tier public service jobs. Most of the successful applicant originated or resided in Tartous and Latakia governorates, traditionally pro-GoS areas. Applicants from former opposition held areas (Dar'a, Rural Damascus, Raqqa, Deir Ez Zor, Quneitra) accounted for 10 % of all jobs for demobilised soldiers and reservists.¹⁹⁶ No information on when the soldiers and reservists who took part in the employment exams for public service were demobilised could be found.

¹⁹⁵ COAR, Syria Update, 24 November 2020, [url](#); SANA, القيادة العامة للجيش تصدر أمرين إداريين بإنهاء الاحتفاظ والاستدعاء للضباط الاحتياطيين وصف الضباط [The Army General Command issues two administrative orders to end the retention and summoning of reserve officers, non-commissioned officers, and reserve personnel], 18 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶ COAR, Syria Update State Steps up as Soldiers Enter Public Service in Drove, 15 February 2021, [url](#)



3. Deferrals and exemptions from military service

The law permits exemptions from military service for certain categories of individuals (described below). However, the process for obtaining an exemption was assessed by sources interviewed FIS during a 2018 fact-finding mission to Beirut and Damascus ‘to include more limitations and more variation on case-by-case basis’.¹⁹⁷ Suhail Al-Ghazi noted that exemptions to the military service are generally implemented in practice. The source had however, knowledge of cases where individuals were extorted at checkpoints on the basis of threats of recruitment by members of the security forces despite having exemptions.¹⁹⁸

3.1 Only sons

The Syrian Military Service Law provides that the only male child to his parents, or single parent can be exempted from military service. The exemption is also applicable if the parents of the only son are divorced, or if one or both parents are deceased.¹⁹⁹ DIS noted that ‘in addition, an only son will be exempted if he has half-brothers or has become an only male child as a result of the death of one or more of his brothers.’²⁰⁰

President Assad issued on 6 August 2014 Legislative Decree No 33, which amends a number of articles of Legislative Decree No 30 of 2007 on the mandatory military service law. The amendments also altered the number of sons per family who may postpone military service, with the numbers becoming as follows: ‘1 may postpone if 2-4 brothers were performing mandatory, voluntary, or reserve military service, 2 if there were 5-8 brothers in the service, and 3 if there were 9 or more brothers in the service. Before the amendments, only one son could postpone.’²⁰¹

According to an expert interviewed by FIS, a family’s only son can still benefit from the exemption regulation, but the GoS has been tightening controls on this. Instead of renewing the exemption every two years, the person concerned is obliged to renew it every single year. From there, the only son is required to renew his exemption until his mother reaches the age when she is not expected to be able to give birth to another child (approximately by the age of 50, according to the source).²⁰²

According to several sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020, the GoS has implemented in practice the provision of exempting only sons from military service. A Western diplomat interviewed by DIS in February 2020 noted that while he has not heard of cases of conscription of only sons, some of his sources did not rule out the possibility that this exemption is not respected in former opposition-held areas.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 6-7

¹⁹⁸ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

¹⁹⁹ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Defense, Only male child, n.d., [url](#)

²⁰⁰ Denmark, DIS, Issues Regarding Military Service, October 2019, [url](#), p. 5

²⁰¹ SANA, President al-Assad issues legislative decree amending mandatory military service law, 6 August 2014, [url](#)

²⁰² Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰³ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 20, 83

3.2 Medical exemptions

Several sources noted that medical committees in the SAA conduct assessments of persons with a medical condition and ultimately decide if they are to be exempted.²⁰⁴ The criteria used by the medical committees for the assessments are not clear, making it difficult to know how it is implemented in practice.²⁰⁵

Sources interviewed by DIS between January and February 2020 indicated that those suffering from serious mental illness, those that had a disability or became disabled while serving in the army, such as losing an eye or limb, were either exempted from military service or assigned to an administrative position where they were not required to carry a weapon. Some sources noted however, that soldiers with mental disorders, such as those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, as well as those who shot themselves in the arm or leg, were still serving in the army.²⁰⁶

Two sources interviewed by FIS in 2018 stated that exemptions were still granted on the basis of medical reasons. Other experts cited estimated that in the case of military conscription the recruitment criteria in general have loosened. Accordingly, even old and obese men, who in the past would have been exempted relatively easily, were conscripted if required by the authorities. According to one source, it is probable that a person will not be given an exemption unless his medical condition is very clearly visible. The source also points out that in some cases it was possible for an individual to get an exemption based on medical grounds if a bribe was paid.²⁰⁷

3.3 Students

Students at universities may under certain conditions be exempted from military service though a 2017 change in law has made it more difficult for university students to continue deferring their conscription.²⁰⁸ DIS noted that amendments made to the Military Service Law in July 2019 by Legislative Decree No. 12 introduced more restrictions on the age limits allowed to start different levels of education and the number of study years during which students are permitted to request exemption from military service.²⁰⁹

A 2018 FIS fact-finding mission report noted that students applying for a deferral from military service were put under more scrutiny than before. Students without proper documentation were conscripted immediately. Older students were more likely to be recruited, however. Persons who have reached the age of 27 were usually not given deferrals by the military police. According to an anonymous source quoted in the report, there were 'quite a few cases where people have student exemptions but were called anyway to join the army'.²¹⁰ Furthermore, the treatment of students was said to depend on the military police unit responsible, for example, for a particular checkpoint, since the police themselves might serve in their posts involuntarily: 'Sometimes these guys [the military police]

²⁰⁴ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrulling, utsettelse og fritak, 14 November 2017, [url](#), pp. 22- 23; Sweden, Lifos Migrationsverket, Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst (version 3.0), 30 May 2017, [url](#), p. 39; Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 75

²⁰⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 61, 83

²⁰⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 21

²⁰⁷ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

²⁰⁸ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), pp. 6, 8

²⁰⁹ Denmark, DIS, Issues Regarding Military Service, October 2019, [url](#), p. 5; SANA, الرئيس الأسد يصدر مرسوما تشريعيا بتعديل مواد من قانون خدمة العلم [President Assad issues a Legislative Decree [no.12] amending articles of the Military Service Law], 14 July 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 7

have been recruited forcefully and they are not very sympathetic to people who have been able to dodge the draft.’²¹¹

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) information on Dar’a governorate from May 2019, students who have suspended their education since the beginning of the civil unrest in 2011 were pardoned by the GoS and allowed to return to college. Those who returned were granted a deferment of their military service. Those who were over 25 years old – the age limit for which the Syrian law states that students can remain at university – were drafted in the army and other affiliated security bodies.²¹²

Syria expert Fabrice Balanche assessed in an interview with DIS in February 2020 that university students are still benefiting from military service deferral while they are studying. The source noted however that Syrian men who lived in former opposition-held areas are not permitted by the Syrian Ministry of Education to postpone their military service by attending university.²¹³

The Col reported on a case recorded in October 2019 of a group of students from Douma travelling to the university to sit for exams. Fifteen students were arrested at a General Security Directorate operated checkpoint as their exemption from military service was viewed as invalid.²¹⁴

Further cases and examples from 2020-2021 could not be found.

3.4 Exemption fee

The Syrian Military Service Law allows Syrian men of military service age (18-42), including registered Palestinians from Syria, to pay a fee (*‘Badal al-Naqdi’*) to get an exemption from compulsory military service and not be called up again. However, this option only applies for people residing abroad.²¹⁵ Reservists are not eligible to pay the exemption fee.²¹⁶

Before November 2020, the exemption fees applied to a male living abroad for no less than four consecutive years, who could pay a fee of USD 5 000 before the war and USD 8 000 after to be exempted from military service.²¹⁷ According to a November 2020 amendment made to the law, Syrians who reside abroad for one year, two years, three years or four years can now pay USD 10 000, 9 000, 8 000 or 7 000 respectively to acquire exemptions. The number of years of residence are calculated for the period either before or after the person reached the age of military recruitment.²¹⁸ Those whose residence periods have exceeded five years after reaching the military age, have to pay a fine of USD 200 per each year in addition to the exemption fee (i.e. for five year it is equivalent to USD 7 200; for six year it is equivalent to USD 7 400, etc.).²¹⁹

According to the chief of Syria’s Immigration and Passports Department interviewed by DIS in November 2018, both persons who left the country legally and those who left illegally can be

²¹¹ Finland, FIS, Fact-Finding Mission to Beirut and Damascus, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 7

²¹² OHCHR, Human Rights Digest Syria, The “unreconciled” concerns of civilians in Dar’a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 6

²¹³ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 58

²¹⁴ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²¹⁵ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 27-28

²¹⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 23

²¹⁷ Enab Baladi, Military Service Exemption Fee: Expensive Return Ticket To Homeland, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁸ Legislative Decree 31, President Bashar Al-Assad issues the LD # 31/2020, amending some articles of the LD# 30 date 03/05/2007, as amended, which contains the Military Service Law, [url](#), p. 1

²¹⁹ Legislative Decree 31, President Bashar Al-Assad issues the LD # 31/2020, amending some articles of the LD# 30 date 03/05/2007, as amended, which contains the Military Service Law, [url](#), p. 2

exempted from their military service obligations.²²⁰ A male of military service born outside Syria and residing continuously there until he reaches 18 years can pay USD 3 000, while one who was born abroad and lived there for at least 10 years before reaching the military age can pay USD 6 500.²²¹ Those exceeding 25 years will have to pay USD 8 000.²²²

Referring to the website of the Syrian embassy in Stockholm, among other sources, DIS reported that those who have left Syria illegally during the conflict will have to first undergo the procedure of ‘sorting out one’s affairs’/status settlement [*taswiyat wadd*]²²³ before they can pay the exemption fee.²²⁴ This means that they will have to go through a security check and resolve any outstanding issues they might have with the GoS.²²⁵ While the German Federal Foreign Office reported in 2018 that it is not known whether this regulation also applies to Syrian men who have left Syria illegally since the beginning of the conflict²²⁶, other sources reported in 2020 that even those who left Syria illegally can pay the exemption fee for military service after undergoing status settlement.²²⁷

Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and February 2020 assessed that the exemption fee system was being implemented in practice by the GoS authorities.²²⁸ Fabrice Balanche noted however, that border guards could demand bribes from returnees despite having paid an exemption fee. Syrian journalist and researcher Asaad Hanna²²⁹ had knowledge of two cases of men who returned from Lebanon and were arrested and conscripted, despite having paid the exemption fee.²³⁰ An October 2020 research based on interviews with Syrians in Lebanon, Homs and Rural Damascus noted that several interviewees stated that many returnees who paid the exemption fee and additional fines were arrested for their previous political activities and some were conscripted.²³¹

In previous years, the exemption fee has been linked with corruption²³², bribery²³³, and discretionary application.²³⁴

²²⁰ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 29

²²¹ Legislative Decree 31, President Bashar Al-Assad issues the LD # 31/2020, amending some articles of the LD# 30 date 03/05/2007, as amended, which contains the Military Service Law, [url](#), p. 1

²²² Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee] n.d., [url](#)

²²³ Sorting out of affairs (also called status settlement) is ‘a process through which a person who is wanted by the GoS applies to settle his/her issues with the GoS. If the GoS agrees to settle the person’s outstanding issues, the person’s name will be deleted from wanted lists and he/she will not be wanted anymore’. See Denmark, DIS, Syria; Security clearance and status settlement for returnees, December 2020, [url](#), p. 3; EASO, COI Report: Syria - Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-17

²²⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria; Security clearance and status settlement for returnees, December 2020, [url](#), p. 7

²²⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 26

²²⁶ Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria [Updated February 2021], p. 46, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation

²²⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 26, 67, 62; Denmark, DIS, Syria; Security clearance and status settlement for returnees, December 2020, [url](#), p. 11

²²⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 28

²²⁹ Asaad Hanna is a Syrian journalist and researcher who has been associated with the armed opposition, White Helmets. See [url](#)

²³⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 59, 76

²³¹ Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria. The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria’s Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²³² Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 174-175

²³³ Syria Direct, Damascus student to pay 8 months of salary in bribe to avoid military service, 20 April 2017, [url](#)

²³⁴ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

3.4.1 Exemption fee for males residing in Syria

In November 2020, the Syrian authorities announced a new decree allowing Syrians residing in the country to pay a waiver in lieu of military conscription. Only those deemed unfit for field operations and determined to serve in non-field service [*khadamat thabiteh*] would be eligible to apply.²³⁵ Based on the decree, those with medical excuses can pay USD 3 000 or the equivalent in the SYP at the rate determined by the Central Bank and they will be assigned solely to administrative services.²³⁶ Those who make use of the waiver will 'be ineligible for governmental housing and cooperatives and are barred from drafting loans from Syrian public banks for five years'.²³⁷ Information on the medical criteria for being deemed unfit for military service and on the implementation in practice of this amendment by the Syrian government could not be found.

²³⁵ Legislative Decree 31, President Bashar Al-Assad issues the LD # 31/2020, amending some articles of the LD# 30 date 03/05/2007, as amended, which contains the Military Service Law, [url](#), p. 1

²³⁶ Jusoor for Studies, Notes on Legislative Decree No. 31 to Amend the Mandatory Military Service Law, 9 November 2020, [url](#)

²³⁷ COAR, Syria Update, 24 November 2020, [url](#)

4. Consequences of draft evasion, military desertion and defection

4.1 Draft evaders

The punishment for evading conscription is defined in the Military Penal Code, but its application remains arbitrary.²³⁸ According to the Syrian Military Penal Code (Articles 98, 99), draft evaders are punished with one to six months imprisonment in peacetime, after which they have to complete their military service in full. In wartime, draft evasion is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison.²³⁹

Sources interviewed by DIS between January and February 2020 differ on the consequences of draft evasion. Some stated that draft evaders would likely not face imprisonment and are sent directly to military training or military service²⁴⁰, a practice that is attributed to GoS' need for manpower. Other sources mentioned that draft evaders would be detained or imprisoned before they are sent to the military service.²⁴¹ An October 2020 research based on interviews with Syrians in Lebanon and in Homs and Rural Damascus noted that interviewees who have evaded the military service or deserted reported that they would be 'at high risk of detention or immediate conscription in Syria'.²⁴² In a January 2021 interview with EASO, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that draft evaders can face imprisonment of up to three months followed by military service.²⁴³

Some sources interviewed by DIS in early 2020 assessed that draft evaders who were also wanted for other offences would be more likely to face imprisonment.²⁴⁴ Reporting on the period between July 2019 and January 2020, the CoI noted that a large number of men wanted for conscription have been detained in Dar'a and Rural Damascus governorates.²⁴⁵

According to Sara Kayyali's information from interviews with draft evaders and military deserters outside of Syria, they have been in most cases detained once caught at checkpoints. Subsequently, some of them were sent to the frontlines.²⁴⁶ Several sources interviewed by the DIS also stated that after being caught, draft evaders would be sent to the frontlines or to fight against ISIL-cells in eastern Syria.²⁴⁷ An October 2020 research by Refugee Protection Watch²⁴⁸ stated that draft evaders have

²³⁸ Swiss Refugee Council, *Syrien: Aufschub des Militärdienstes für Studenten* [Postponement of military service for students], 11 June 2019, [url](#), p. 6

²³⁹ Syrian Arab Republic, Legislative Decree No. 61/1950, Military Penal Code, [url](#); Syrian Arab Republic, Law No. 61 of 1950, as amended (Military Penal Code) [unofficial translation], 16 February 2017, [url](#), p. 1

²⁴⁰ Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Denmark, DIS, *Syria Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#), p. 31

²⁴¹ Denmark, DIS, *Syria Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#), p. 31

²⁴² Refugee Protection Watch, *Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria. The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees*, October 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴³ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

²⁴⁴ Denmark, DIS, *Syria Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#), p. 31

²⁴⁵ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* [A/HRC/43/57], 28 January 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²⁴⁶ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

²⁴⁷ Denmark, DIS, *Syria Military Service*, May 2020, [url](#), p. 32

²⁴⁸ The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) is a coalition formed in 2019 that bring together Lebanese, Syrian and European organisations working in the human rights, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian fields. See [url](#)



minimal training before being sent to participate in active fighting.²⁴⁹ Some draft evaders managed to avoid being sent to frontlines by using connections and paying bribes to relevant authorities.²⁵⁰ For more information on the factors influencing deployment to frontlines and participating in active fighting see [Section 2.5](#).

Older information pointed to cases where draft evaders were subjected to violence from military superiors, torture and enforced disappearances.²⁵¹

4.1.1 Amendment to Article 97 of the Military Service Law

In December 2019, an amendment to Article 97 of the Military Service Law was announced by the GoS which applies to men who have reached the age of 43, evaded compulsory military service and have not paid the exemption fee. The amendment entails for the 'executive seizure of financial assets [of such a person] without warning when he reaches 43 years of age, as well as the provisional seizure of capital held by his wife, or wives, and children, until it can be proven that these did not come from [the person in question], in cases where his capital was insufficient'.²⁵²

The law previously allowed for the conditional seizure of assets of those who failed to pay the exemption fee, pending court judgement. In February 2021 however, Syria's Ministry for Media and Information posted a video in which Colonel Elias al-Bitar, head of the army's Exemptions and Reserves Branch, announced the immediate confiscation of assets, without previous notice, for Syrian men who did not pay the required exemption fee within a period of three months from the day they turned 43.²⁵³ In case the assets of the draft evader are insufficient, the assets of his wife/wives and children can also be confiscated until the source of the funds was verified. Human Rights Watch stated that the amendment gives the authorities the power to 'immediately confiscate and sell an individual's property without providing notice or giving the individual an opportunity to challenge the decision'.²⁵⁴ Judges and lawyers interviewed on the matter remarked that the GoS does not have legal ground for the seizure of the assets of the draft evader's relatives.²⁵⁵ Information on the implementation in practice of this provision could not be found.

4.1.2 Potential consequences for family members

Regarding the treatment of family members, sources differ in their assessment. While several sources stated that family members of draft evaders would not face any consequences²⁵⁶, other sources indicated that they would face house searches²⁵⁷, pressure and harassment from military police or intelligence services to reveal the whereabouts of male relatives wanted for military service.²⁵⁸ In

²⁴⁹ Refugee Protection Watch, Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria. The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees, October 2020, [url](#), p. 31

²⁵⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 32

²⁵¹ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 8

²⁵² Al-Mustafa, M., Drain Society, Feed the Military, Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵³ HRW, Syrian 'Military Evaders' Face Unlawful Seizure of Property, Assets, 9 February 2021, [url](#); Middle East Eye, Damascus threatens to seize property from displaced Syrians over conscription fees, 12 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ HRW, Syrian 'Military Evaders' Face Unlawful Seizure of Property, Assets, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ Verify Syria, Specialists answered ... Does the Syrian regime have the right to enforce seizure of the funds of the families of those who have failed to "serve in the education"?, 7 February 2021, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Seizing assets of military evaders' relatives: Legal grounds, 11 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 36

²⁵⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 37

²⁵⁸ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021; Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

some cases, family members have been arrested or required to report to an intelligence service branch for questioning.²⁵⁹

In a February 2021 interview with EASO, an international humanitarian organization working in Syria mentioned a case in which the authorities conditioned the granting of security clearance required for renewing a lease agreement by requiring the applicant to provide information on the whereabouts of male relatives wanted for military service.²⁶⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed that family members of draft evaders from areas loyal to the GoS won't face the same kind of harassment as those originating in former opposition-held areas.²⁶¹

4.2 Military deserters and defectors

According to the Military Penal Code (Articles 100, 101), desertion is punishable by one to five years imprisonment in peacetime and can result in a prison sentence up to twice as long in wartime. Those who have left the country following desertion can be punished with a penalty of up to 15 years imprisonment in wartime. Desertion to the enemy is punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty.²⁶²

In the early years of the conflict, desertion from the SAA occurred frequently with some sources estimating that by mid-2014 between 20 000 and 100 000 thousand conscripts and officers deserted.²⁶³ Since then, desertions have become a relatively rare occurrence.²⁶⁴

According to a Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) report which analysed classified documents of the Syrian security services²⁶⁵, the General Command of the Armed Forces provided information concerning deserters and defectors to the Military Intelligence Directorate branch of the security services. The General Command of the Armed Forces then issues orders based on the instructions of the Military Intelligence Directorate. In practice, detention orders were often issued directly by the Military Intelligence Directorate instead of the General Command of the Armed Forces.²⁶⁶

In previous years, defectors were often punished in the same way as those who actively joined the opposition. In targeted campaigns, the government systematically arrested defectors and military personnel suspected of sympathising with the opposition.²⁶⁷ Reporting for the period between mid-

²⁵⁹ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021; Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

²⁶⁰ An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

²⁶¹ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

²⁶² Syrian Arab Republic, Legislative Decree No. 61/1950, Military Penal Code, [url](#)

²⁶³ Washington Post (The), Talking to Assad's Military Deserters, 17 December 2015, [url](#); Gaub, F., Syria's Military: Last Man Standing?, 29 July 2014, [url](#)

²⁶⁴ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, August 2017, [url](#), p. 33; Albrecht, H. and, Koehler, K., Going on the Run: What Drives Military Insubordination in Violent Domestic Conflict?, American University in Cairo, 2 March 2016, [url](#), p. 16

²⁶⁵ Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) is a US based non-profit organisation which provide insights and analysis on human rights violations in Syria. The analysis is based on a sample of 5 003 documents drawn from about 483 000 papers retrieved from Syria during the civil war from government facilities. SJAC, Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents, April 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁶⁶ SJAC, Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents, April 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁶⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic, 3 February 2016, [url](#), p. 4

July 2018 and mid-January 2019, the Col assessed that conscript deserters were among the groups most likely to be detained arbitrarily by the GoS forces.²⁶⁸

Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020 noted that deserters are imprisoned.²⁶⁹ Fabrice Balanche stated that the deserter would be tried by the military court and given a short prison sentence, due to the army's need for manpower on the frontlines.²⁷⁰ According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, deserters are placed on wanted lists and if caught will be arrested. They can then face imprisonment up to six months after which they are sent back to the army.²⁷¹ If the deserter has a background of anti-GoS activity he could face longer imprisonment²⁷² or execution.²⁷³ SNHR stated that deserters are usually detained by branches of the Syrian intelligence services, which may expose them to the risk of torture and enforced disappearances.²⁷⁴ A Western diplomat interviewed by DIS indicated that the GoS would not only punish deserters according to the provisions of the law but would also make use of the provisions of the anti-terrorism law of 2012 (Decree No. 19/2012).²⁷⁵

Some sources interviewed by DIS pointed to the possibility of avoiding punishment for desertion if the deserter would undergo the process of status settlement and re-join the army. However, the status settlement would not cover crimes committed by the deserter such as killings or rape, for which he would still face trial in court.²⁷⁶

A number of sources interviewed by DIS indicated that the GoS has changed its practice and would no longer kill or execute deserters as in the previous years of the war. However, some sources assessed that deserters would still risk being killed or executed by the GoS authorities, giving the examples of men who were executed in 2020 while trying to desert during the Idlib offensive²⁷⁷ or the case of Safwan Bakour who was executed in 2019 for treason despite having sorted out his affairs.²⁷⁸

Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed in January 2021 that the treatment of defectors may include arrest, prolonged detention, torture, death in detention and execution. Some defectors, depending on their background and influence in reconciled areas, would not be subjected to this type of treatment.²⁷⁹

Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office estimated that around 92 former opposition fighters and defectors from the SAA were forcibly disappeared in southern Syria since the area has undergone the reconciliation process in 2018. Death notifications for 31 of them were received by their families.²⁸⁰ In November 2020, the Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency, citing local sources from Syria, reported that 98 persons, including 40 military defectors from Dar'a were tortured by the GoS authorities since the signing of the reconciliation agreement in 2018.²⁸¹

²⁶⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²⁶⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 33

²⁷⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 59

²⁷¹ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

²⁷² Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

²⁷³ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 33

²⁷⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 90

²⁷⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 84

²⁷⁶ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 33-34

²⁷⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 34

²⁷⁸ Syrian Observer (The), Hezbollah Arrests Them, and the Regime Executes Them, 2 August 2019, [url](#) based their information on reporting done by the Lebanese news site Al-Modon

²⁷⁹ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

²⁸⁰ Syria Direct, Reconciliation without forgiveness: Defectors and former opposition members face 'deferred execution', 9 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁸¹ AA, Syrian regime killed 98 people in Daraa: Sources, 22 November 2020, [url](#)

Reconciled military defectors were arrested despite the amnesties brought forward by legislative decrees No. 18 and No. 20. Between July 2018 and mid-March 2020, Horan Free League recorded the arrest of 140 military defectors across Dar'a governorate. Some of them were released and joined the SAA while a small number were reported to have died in prison.²⁸²

In 2020, several sources reported on military defectors from Dar'a governorate who were arrested²⁸³ despite having settled their affairs with GoS and who subsequently died in prison, in some cases reportedly under torture. Their families received death notifications from the authorities, sometimes two years after the defector's arrest.²⁸⁴ In June 2020, a group of eight reconciled opposition fighters serving for the SAA in Rural Damascus defected for unknown reasons.²⁸⁵ All defectors were reportedly killed following clashes with the SAA forces.²⁸⁶

For the reporting period between January and July 2020, the Col verified 34 cases where men have been forcibly disappeared in in Dar'a, Homs, Quneitra, Rural Damascus and Sweida provinces. The cases included military defectors who were subjected to enforced disappearances following arrest and detention, including those who had undergone a reconciliation process in Dar'a governorate.²⁸⁷ In January 2021, SOHR reported on the death of a defector with the rank of colonel from Dar'a governorate who reportedly died under torture after more than two years in GoS detention.²⁸⁸

In January 2021, COAR, citing the Syrian Center for Safety and Defection²⁸⁹, reported that 40 SAA soldiers defected and relocated to Idlib governorate. A further 10 soldiers originating from Dar'a, Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates were reported to have defected in mid-January 2021.²⁹⁰

COAR noted that the of number desertions and defections has increased in since early 2020, recording a total of 132 desertions and defections from the GoS forces between January 2020 and January 2021. The data was collected from open sources and validated by local researchers. COAR assessed that many deserters and defectors were originally from governorates that have undergone reconciliation.²⁹¹

²⁸² Al-Jabassini, A., Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria, European University Institute, 7 April 2020, [url](#), p. 13

²⁸³ SNHR, At Least 1,882 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest/ Detention Documented in Syria in 2020, 149 of Them in December: Detainees Include 52 Children and 39 Women, 2 January 2021, [url](#), p. 16; SHRC, Arrest and kidnapping in October 2020, 8 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁴ SOHR, Arrested two years ago | Army defector dies under torture in regime security prisons, 8 December 2020, [url](#); SNHR, Extrajudicial Killing Claims the Lives of 1,734 Civilians in Syria in 2020, Including 99 in December; Killings of IDPs and Deaths by Mines and Remote Bombings Stood Out Among Killings in Syria in 2020, 1 January 2021, [url](#), p. 18; SHRC, Arrest and kidnapping in October 2020, 8 November 2020, [url](#); SNHR, Daraa soldier who defected from Syrian regime dies due to torture in the regime's detention center, Nov 9, 11 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁵ Syria Call, Aircraft participated in it ... Clashes between the Assad regime and young men who had defected from it in the countryside of, 13 June 2020, [url](#); Sawt Al-Aasima, Using its planes and tanks ... Violent battles in the city of Conscience, and the regime is committing a massacre on its outskirts, 13 June 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁶ Carter Center (The), Weekly Conflict Summary, 8 -14 June 2020, [url](#), p. 4

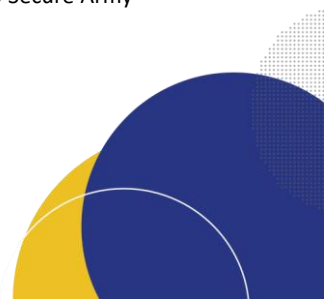
²⁸⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/45/31], 14 August 2020, [url](#), p. 6

²⁸⁸ SOHR, Arrested over 25 months ago | Defector colonel from Daraa countryside dies under torture in regime prisons, 16 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁸⁹ The Syrian Center for Safety and Defection is reportedly made up of activists with ties to the anti-GoS opposition which aims to document and support defectors from the SAA. See Syrian Observer (The), Activists Launch Center to Secure Army Defectors, 14 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁹⁰ COAR, Syria Update, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁹¹ COAR, Syria Update, 8 February 2021, [url](#)



4.2.1 Potential consequences for family members

Several sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020 stated that family members of deserters and defectors would not face problems with the GoS. Other sources however, assessed that family members may still face house visits, harassment, threats, arrest, interrogation, torture, confiscation of property and pressure from authorities.²⁹² DIS interviewed three sources who respectively stated that either immediate²⁹³ and extended family members²⁹⁴ may face consequences due to desertion/defection of a family member, though it could be hard to distinguish whether this was for actual desertion or joining the opposition.²⁹⁵ In January 2021, Suhail Al-Ghazi assessed that family members of defectors may also be subjected to arrest, prolonged detention, torture, death in detention and execution.²⁹⁶

The extent to which family members may face consequences is influenced by factors such as the rank of the deserter/defector, the family's place of residence and religious background and the secret service and officer in charge of the area.²⁹⁷ For example, family members of high-ranking deserters/defectors or those from opposition-held areas would be more likely to face consequences than those with a low rank in the army or who originate from GoS-held areas.²⁹⁸

The actions of the deserter/defector, such as killing soldiers or officers or joining opposition groups and participating in armed actions against the SAA, would be further influencing factors on the treatment of their family members.²⁹⁹

4.3 Amnesties regarding draft evaders and military deserters and their implementation in practice

Amnesty laws have been issued on several occasions since Syria's crisis began in March 2011 to grant draft evaders or deserters amnesty from prosecution.³⁰⁰ Some organisations stated that these measures have not necessarily resulted in the return of refugees or draft evaders, because such individuals would still be required to complete their military service after turning themselves in.³⁰¹

Legislative Decree No. 18 issued in October 2018, granted a general amnesty to certain individuals in Syria or abroad, accused of deserting or avoiding military service. However, the decree did not exempt the person to whom amnesty was granted from military service.³⁰² The amnesty had to be taken up within four months for those residing within the country, or six months for those living abroad.³⁰³

²⁹² Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 37

²⁹³ DIS interviews with Elizabeth Tsurkov, researcher on Syria and fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 56

²⁹⁴ DIS interviews with a Western diplomat and with Suhail Al-Ghazi in February 2020. Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 81, 84

²⁹⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 38

²⁹⁶ Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 27 January 2021

²⁹⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 37

²⁹⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 37-38

²⁹⁹ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 11

³⁰⁰ TIMEP, TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

³⁰¹ TIMEP, Legislative Decree No.18 – Military Service Amnesty, 6 December 2018, [url](#)

³⁰² Reuters, Syria's offers amnesty to deserters and draft dodgers, 9 October 2018, [url](#); Washington Post (The), Syria offers amnesty to deserters and draft dodgers, 9 October 2018, [url](#)

³⁰³ EIP, Refugee return in Syria: Dangers, security risks and information scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 10

Those who fought on the side of the armed opposition or dissented against GoS were excluded from the amnesty.³⁰⁴

On 28 October 2018, the Ministry of Defence issued a circular that provided for the implementation of the amnesty law. The circular forbade the arrest of reservists who had evaded military service and states that the names of reservists who were wanted for active service would be removed from the list. Those reservists could still be called up again in the event of war or a state of emergency, however. According to some estimates, this decree could have affected 800 000 people who have left the country or gone into hiding.³⁰⁵

According to the Atlantic Council, despite the October 2018 amnesty law, the GoS issued new lists of persons called for emergency military service, which contained 400 000 names, including a large number of youths whose names had just been removed from the list by virtue of the amnesty measure.³⁰⁶ Syria Direct³⁰⁷ reported in March 2019 on a case of a defector who returned to Syria following the amnesty and was reportedly taken by the authorities upon his return. His whereabouts were unknown.³⁰⁸

Representatives of COAR interviewed by DIS in November 2018 assessed that very few individuals would be interested in using the amnesty law, the main reasons being that it does not pardon them for fulfilling the military service. Other interviewed sources mentioned that GoS has not respected prior amnesties and reconciliation agreements, fuelling distrust among Syrians. A Syrian official stated however, that following the amnesty 'a crucial number of both deserters and draft evaders had handed themselves in to the authorities.'³⁰⁹

In September 2019, the GoS issued Decree No 20/2019 which among other provisions, granted amnesty for deserters and draft evaders under the condition that they would re-enlist for military service within three months for those residing in Syria and six months for those residing abroad.³¹⁰ Those who were labelled as 'terrorists' and those who were part of the armed opposition to the GoS were excluded from the amnesty.³¹¹

Some sources reporting in 2019 and 2020 stated that the GoS authorities were not respecting the amnesty agreements by continuing to arrest civilians and former affiliates of armed opposition factions in areas that previously signed settlement agreements with the GoS.³¹² In 2019, OHCHR also stated that it received information that returnees having been detained following their return to Syria in response to the amnesty decree issued in September 2019.³¹³

On 22 March 2020, the GoS issued Legislative Decree No 6 which provided for a limited amnesty for military deserters. In order to benefit from the amnesty military deserters had to turn themselves in within period of three months for those inside the country, and six months for those who are currently

³⁰⁴ TIMEP, Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2018 (Military Service Amnesty), 20 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 1-2

³⁰⁵ National (The), Syrian military clears men wanted for extra military service, 31 October 2018, [url](#)

³⁰⁶ Atlantic Council, Forced conscription continues despite amnesty by Syrian Government, 13 February 2019, [url](#)

³⁰⁷ Syria Direct is 'an independent journalism organization focused on Syria', founded in 2013. For more information see [url](#)

³⁰⁸ Syria Direct, 'Is it safe to go home?' Amid promises of amnesty in Syria, defectors abroad weigh their options, 18 March 2019, [url](#)

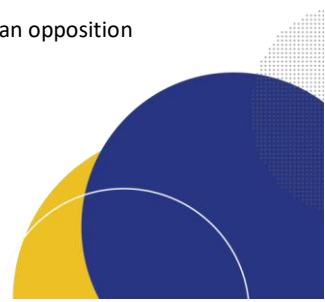
³⁰⁹ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 30-31

³¹⁰ RFI, Syria president decrees amnesty, reduces sentences, 15 September 2019, [url](#)

³¹¹ Reuters, Syria's Assad issues amnesty reducing punishment for crimes, 15 September 2019, [url](#)

³¹² USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Syria, 11 March 2020, [url](#), p. 19; Al Monitor, Syrian opposition skeptical of Assad's amnesty decision, 4 October 2019, [url](#)

³¹³ OHCHR, Regular press briefing by the Information Service: Syria, 8 November 2019, [url](#)



abroad.³¹⁴ Sources reported that the amnesty was only partially implemented in relation to other offences it covered.³¹⁵

The sources interviewed by EASO for this report stated that little to no information was available on the implementation and scope of the general amnesties issued by the GoS for draft evaders and deserters.³¹⁶ Some sources mentioned that generally, Syrians did not make use of the amnesties because they did not trust the GoS to respect the provisions³¹⁷ and because the amnesties did not remove the duty to perform military service.³¹⁸ Sources interviewed by DIS between January and March 2020 reported that GoS detained or disappeared military deserters and defectors from former opposition-held areas who were granted amnesty as part of the reconciliation agreements. Others noted however, that they knew of cases where deserters covered by amnesty were imprisoned for a few months and then sent to perform the military service or draft evaders who were sent directly to military service.³¹⁹ Syrian refugees, returnees and IDPs interviewed for a June 2020 joint NGO report stated that the GoS authorities arrested and detained Syrians despite the amnesties.³²⁰

³¹⁴ COAR, Syria Update, 30 March 2020, [url](#); AP News, Syrian president issues amnesty, reduces sentences, 22 March 2020, [url](#)

³¹⁵ HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#); SNHR, Two Months Since Issuing Amnesty Decree, the Syrian Regime Released Only 96 of Nearly 130,000 Detainees and Arrested 113 More, 15 May 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³¹⁶ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

³¹⁷ Kayyali, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 18 February 2021

³¹⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), p. 35

³¹⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria Military Service, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 35-36

³²⁰ DRC, Into the Unknown: Listening to Syria's Displaced In the Search for Durable Solutions, June 2020, [url](#), p. 16

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Annex II: Terms of Reference

The report should focus on military service in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in 2020 and first quarter of 2021, looking specifically at the provisions and implementation of the military service law, current patterns of recruitment (prevalence, methods, deployment and discharge), implementation of rules regarding exemption from military service and the consequences of draft evasion, desertion and defection.

- ❑ Military service and official conscription
 - Military service law provisions
 - Conscientious objection
 - Current recruitment practices of conscripts and reservists to the SAA
 - Methods of conscription
 - Duties and tasks of recruited conscripts and reservists, including deployments and participation in active fighting
 - Discharge of conscripts and reservists serving in the SAA
- ❑ Exemptions and deferrals from military service
 - Overview of legal exemptions and implementation in practice
- ❑ Consequences of draft evasion, desertion and defection
 - Treatment of draft evaders, military deserters and defectors
 - Treatment of family members of draft evaders, military deserters and defectors
 - Amnesties regarding draft evaders and military deserters and their implementation in practice



