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Introduction

This report was drawn up on the basis of the questions asked and points for attention mentioned in the Terms of Reference (ToR). The ToR were compiled on behalf of the Ministry of Justice and Security and adopted on 6 March 2023. They are available, together with the report, on the website of the Dutch Government.

This General Country of Origin Information Report describes the situation in Syria insofar as this is important for the assessment of asylum applications from persons originating from Syria, and for decision-making regarding the repatriation of rejected Syrian asylum-seekers. It is an update of the General Country of Origin Information Report of May 2022.¹ The report covers the period from June 2022 to July 2023.

This report is a factual, neutral and objective representation of the findings that were made during the period under consideration. It is not a policy document, does not reflect the government's vision or policy in relation to Syria and does not offer any policy recommendations. It does not contain any conclusions concerning immigration policy.

This report does not claim to be exhaustive with regard to individual security incidents and human rights violations; the incidents specifically mentioned are cited for the purpose of substantiating a more general view. The situation in Syria, can, however, differ from place to place and change very rapidly.

The report has been compiled on the basis of public and confidential sources, using carefully selected, analysed and verified information. Use has been made of information from various agencies of the United Nations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), specialist literature and media reporting. Except where the facts are generally undisputed or unless stated otherwise, the content in this report is based on multiple sources. The text represents a synthesis of the sources. Where qualifications are given, these derive from the sources. The public sources that were consulted are listed in §11.1 of this report.

This report also uses information from interviews conducted with relevant and expert sources. These were conducted partly in person – in particular during a fact-finding mission to Lebanon and Jordan – and partly online during the research for this report. Some information also originates from the foreign diplomatic missions of the Netherlands. This information was primarily used to support and supplement passages based on public information. The confidential sources are marked as a 'confidential source' in the footnotes and are accompanied by a date. Where information from a single source is included, this is explicitly stated. This is information that is worth reporting, but could not be corroborated by other sources.

¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2022/06/17/algemeen-ambtsbericht-syrie-van-May-2022>.

1 The social and political context

1.1 The social and political context

General aspects

The civil war in Syria started in March 2011, when the Syrian administration under President Bashar al-Assad (hereinafter referred to as 'Assad') acted against anti-government demonstrations with unprecedented ferocity. Over the years, the conflict developed into an armed struggle, both national and international. As a result of the conflict, ninety per cent of the population were living below the poverty threshold during the reporting period. In February 2023, Syria and Türkiye were hit by earthquakes that devastated large parts of north-west Syria.² According to the United Nations (UN), fifteen million of the 23 million inhabitants of Syria were in need of humanitarian aid before the earthquakes (see Chapter 2).³

There were approximately seven million internally displaced persons in Syria during the reporting period. More than 5.4 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers were living in neighbouring countries. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled to Europe and elsewhere since the conflict. Apart from the neighbouring countries, Germany is the country housing the most Syrian refugees – a total of some 850,000.⁴ The UN reported in 2021 that at least 350,209 people – both civilians and fighters – had been killed during the conflict in Syria, and a high UN official even stated that this was undoubtedly an underestimate of the true number of deaths. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an NGO in the United Kingdom, estimated the total death toll in May 2021 at around 610,000. In June 2022, the UN estimated that over 306,000 civilians had been killed in Syria since March 2011 – about 1.5% of the population (for more information on the security situation see Chapter 3).⁵

Armed conflicts

Syria continued to be involved in various armed conflicts during the reporting period. There were international conflicts with the US-led Global Coalition against ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham),⁶ and with Türkiye and Israel (see

² UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/52/69, * 7 February 2023, p. 1; OCHA, *Earthquakes: North-west Syria Situation Report No. 1*, 7 March 2023: following the earthquakes of 6 February, over 4,500 deaths and 8,700 injuries have been reported in north-west Syria since 6 March. Thousands of people have been left homeless, due to the partial or complete destruction of over 10,600 buildings in north-west Syria.

³ <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/about-ocha-syria> (downloaded 31 May 2023); BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *Relief group warns of 'imminent famine' in Syria*, 31 January 2023.

⁴ European Commission, *Syria Factsheet*: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east/syria_en (most recently updated 15 March 2023), Al Jazeera, *Twelve years on from the beginning of Syria's war*, 15 March 2023; UNHCR, *Syria Refugee Crisis Explained*, 14 March 2023.

⁵ OHCHR, *UN Human Rights Office estimates more than 306,000 civilians were killed over 10 years in Syria conflict*, 28 June 2022; SOHR, *Total death toll | Over 606,000 people killed across Syria since the beginning of the "Syrian Revolution", including 495,000 documented by SOHR*, 1 June 2021; BBC, *Syria war: UN calculates new death toll*, 24 September 2021.

⁶ Since the proclamation of a cross-border caliphate in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has called itself 'Islamic State' (IS). ISIS is also referred to as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or Daesh/Da'ish (the Arabic name of ISIS, in full: *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*). The organisation will be referred to in this report as ISIS. ISIS is listed in the *Kennisbank*

Chapter 3).⁷ The Syrian Arab Army (SAA, the government army) – along with allies such as Russia and Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed Shiite militias – was also involved in various armed conflicts, including against armed groups resisting the Syrian government, such as *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS),⁸ the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Syrian National Army (SNA)⁹ and ISIS. At the same time, there was armed infighting between the various armed groups. Other armed conflicts on Syrian territory included Turkish attacks on the SDF and Kurdish militias, and Israeli attacks on Hezbollah and Iranian targets in Syria in particular (see Chapter 3).¹⁰

Peace initiatives

International efforts to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria continued. An example is UN Resolution 2254 of December 2015, which called for a ceasefire and negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition. These negotiations did not produce any significant results during the reporting period. In November 2022, representatives of Iran, Russia and Türkiye – the 'guarantor countries' of the Astana process – confirmed their commitment to Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. The Astana process¹¹ was a set of initiatives and plans launched in 2017 by the guarantor countries to resolve the Syrian civil war. These initiatives did not achieve any substantial progress during the reporting period.¹² At the end of June 2023, the Kazakh government announced that Kazakhstan would cease hosting the meetings of the Astana process. Where those meetings would be held in future was not yet known.¹³

Rapprochement with other countries

Some countries in the region sought rapprochement with the Assad administration in order to restore diplomatic, security and economic ties. In February 2023, a Jordanian Foreign Minister visited Syria for the first time since the outbreak of the conflict.¹⁴ Turkish and Syrian dignitaries also met during the reporting period to discuss the possibility of rapprochement between their two countries. Following over a decade of hostilities, a rapprochement between Syria and Türkiye would represent a major turning point in the conflict, given the important role that Ankara was playing in it. Türkiye has a military presence in the north of Syria, for instance (see

terroristische organisaties of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), a database of terrorism that lists organisations whose financial assets have been frozen by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) because they are associated with terrorist activities: <https://kennisbankterrorisme.nctv.nl/organisaties> (downloaded 17 June 2023).

⁷ <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/international-armed-conflict-in-syria> (downloaded 10 March 2023).

⁸ Translation: Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant

⁹ The SNA should not be confused with the Syrian Arab Army, SAA (the government army). The SNA is a collection of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups (see §1.2.2).

¹⁰ <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/international-armed-conflict-in-syria> (downloaded 10 March 2023); France24, *US airstrikes target Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria*, 24 August 2022.

¹¹ The process takes its name from the Kazakh capital of Astana, where the meetings under the process were held until the end of this reporting period.

¹² UN Special Envoy for Syria, *United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen briefing to the Security Council*, 21 December 2022; Daily Sabah, *19th Astana talks to discuss Syria crisis commence in Kazakhstan*, 22 November 2022; The Astana Times, *Astana Process Participants Reaffirm Commitment to Syria's Territorial Integrity, Pledge to Combat Terrorism*, 24 November 2022.

¹³ Al Jazeera, *Kazakhstan decides to stop hosting Syria talks, surprising Russia*, 21 June 2023.

¹⁴ Al Jazeera, *Jordan's foreign minister visits Syria in first trip since war*, 15 February 2023.

also §1.2.2).¹⁵ The member states of the Arab League (AL) met in May 2023 to reinstate Syria in the organisation. It had been suspended by the AL in November 2011, as the Syrian government had not put a stop to the Syrian security apparatus's violent action against demonstrators.¹⁶

Sanctions

Various organisations imposed sanctions on Syria in response to the Assad administration's violent suppression of the civilian population. The EU sanctions target, for instance, companies and prominent business people profiting from their ties with the Syrian government and the war economy. On 24 April 2023, the EU imposed additional sanctions on people and organisations that have ties with the Syrian government. This new sanctions package related to the Syrian authorities' large-scale drug trade, the suppression of the population, and Syria's cooperation with Russia. According to the EU, these sanctions did not affect support for the Syrian population, such as the humanitarian aid following the recent earthquakes.¹⁷ The US imposed far-reaching sanctions on Syria in 2019, when the US Congress passed what became known as the 'Caesar sanctions'.¹⁸ These sanctions are intended mainly to penalise the Syrian president's financial backers, who have helped him stay in power since the very first uprisings.¹⁹

1.2 Areas of control

The conflict created four areas of control in Syria.²⁰ As in the previous reporting period, the control areas remained virtually unchanged during this reporting period in terms of geographical extent and governance.²¹ The areas were de facto administered as follows:

- the Syrian authorities (under President Bashar al-Assad)
- the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)
- the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)

¹⁵ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *SYRIAN-TURKISH RAPPROCHEMENT: Historical enemies, bosom friends, warring neighbors and ... reconciled realists*, January 2023, p. 4; AP News, *Moscow hosts more Turkey-Syria rapprochement talks*, 25 April 2023.

¹⁶ Al Jazeera, *Middle East round-up: Syria rejoins the Arab League*, 11 May 2023; The Guardian, *Syria suspended from Arab League*, 12 November 2011.

¹⁷ European Council, *Syria: Council extends sanctions against the regime for another year*, 31 May 2022; Council of the EU, *Syria: EU sanctions drug trade benefitting the regime*, 24 April 2023.

¹⁸ The Caesar sanctions are named after the pseudonym of a Syrian photographer who had taken photographs of extensive torture carried out in Assad's prisons.

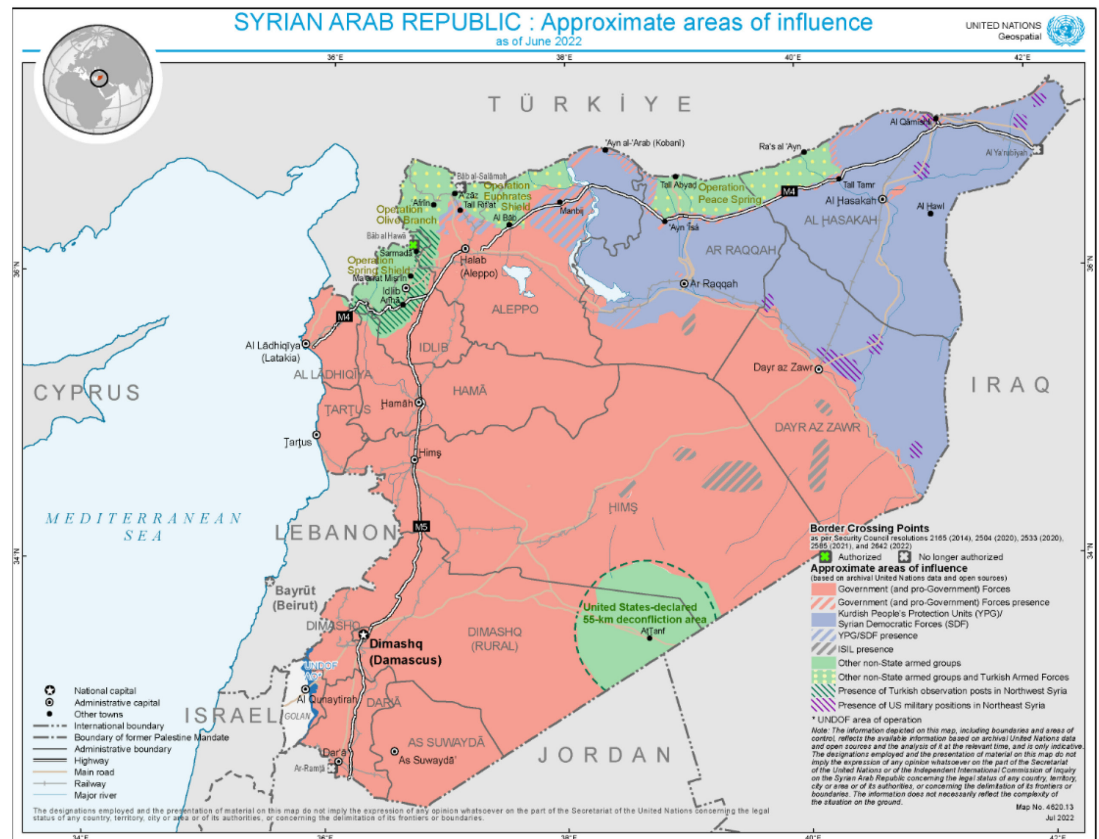
¹⁹ The Guardian, *US announces 180-day exemption to Syria sanctions for disaster aid*, 10 February 2023.

²⁰ Most sources do not refer to the desert area near the outpost of al-Tanf (in the provinces of Rif Dimashq and Homs), where the US has a military base, as a separate control area. The American base was the target of attacks by militias affiliated with Iran during this reporting period. Reportedly, these attacks did not cause any fatalities, but several members of the US-affiliated rebel group *Jaysh Suriya al-Hurra* (the Army of Free Syria), formerly known as *Jaysh Maghawir al-Thawra* (the Revolutionary Commando Army), were injured. The group's new name, the Army of Free Syria, should not be confused with the name of the broader coalition of Syrian rebels, *Al-Jaysh al-Suri al-Hurr* (the Free Syrian Army), according to BBC Monitoring: BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Drones target US military base in Syria*, 20 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Shafaq News Agency), *Drone attack targets US base in Syria*, 15 August 2022.

²¹ Following an agreement between Russia and Türkiye in March 2020 that demarcated a geographical border between the opposition-controlled and government-controlled areas in the north-west of Syria, little changed as regards the territories of the various areas of control that developed during the war: International Crisis Group, *Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria*, 18 July 2022; Polgeonow, *Syria Control Map & Report - July 2023 (Subscription)*, 21 July 2023. Levant23, *Political Control Map of Syria*, 19 March 2023.

- the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

The map below (Map 1) shows an approximation of the four areas of control, colour-coded as follows: red for the Syrian authorities, green with yellow dots for the SIG, green for the SSG, and purple for the AANES.²²



The four control areas and the groups there are described in more detail below. The descriptions aim to provide a picture of the situation; they do not claim to be comprehensive as regards the groups there and the various power blocs. Although the borders are to some extent frozen, armed confrontations were still taking place in the areas of control. The extent to which there was conflict between the various groups and control areas during the reporting period will be discussed in Chapter 2.

1.2.1

The Syrian authorities (under President Assad)

The homogeneous red showing the Syrian authorities' area of control on Map 1 indicates that the Syrian government controls that area. A variety of armed groups – both foreign and domestic – affiliated with the Syrian authorities were active there, however, all of which had their own power bases to various extents in certain parts. Examples of foreign factions affiliated with Assad's Syrian government are the Russian army, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC),²³ Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah, and pro-Iranian militias. There were also, for instance, self-defence militias and quasi-criminal gangs (generally known as *Shabiha*) affiliated

²² OHCHR: www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/MapOfInfluence_Syria_2022Jun.jpg

²³ The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps or *Pasdaran* is Iran's elite military force.

with the Syrian government, and armed groups of former opposition fighters reconciled with the government.²⁴

According to a confidential source, the Assad administration was increasingly forced to cede control of government territory to the above factions and others not affiliated with the Syrian authorities, especially outside the major cities. The government remained in power in name only; de facto it was not.²⁵ The government had little or no control in parts of the southern provinces of Daraa and Suweida, for example.²⁶ In East Daraa, the Eighth Brigade of Ahmed al-Ouda reportedly had control and the Syrian authorities played only a minor role.²⁷ Suweida is inhabited mainly by Druze (a religious community), whose local religious leadership had adopted a more or less neutral stance in the conflict.²⁸ ISIS cells and rebel groups were active during the reporting period in various provinces in the area controlled by the Syrian authorities.²⁹ ISIS was even said by a confidential source to have checkpoints again in the remote Badia desert.³⁰ ISIS did not yet have a centralised power structure; according to the same source it was busy growing its capacity.³¹

1.2.2 *The Syrian Interim Government (SIG)*

The SIG, which was backed by Türkiye, administered parts of the north of Syria (shown in green with yellow dots on Map 1).³² Geographically speaking, the SIG area comprised the northern parts of the provinces of Aleppo, Raqqqa and Hasaka bordering on Türkiye.³³ As noted in the previous report, Turkish armed forces and armed opposition groups had a presence in SIG territory. In 2017, various existing armed groups joined the Syrian National Army (SNA), which was regarded as a Turkish proxy. According to a confidential source, the SNA had a smaller presence in the Operation Peace Spring area (see footnote 33) than in the other SIG areas. Conversely, the Turkish army had a prominent military presence in that area.³⁴

²⁴ International Crisis Group, *Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria*, 18 July 2022. BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Clash reported in Syrian president's hometown blamed on relative*, 23 June 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Hezbollah expands presence near Syrian capital – SOHR*, 26 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Hezbollah expands presence near Syrian capital – SOHR*, 26 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Anadolu News Agency Website) *Turkish FM pledges 'close cooperation' with Iran amid Syria rapprochement*, 18 January 2023; Combating Terrorism Center, *The Quds Force in Syria: Combatants, Units, and Actions*, VOLUME 16, ISSUE 6, June 2023.

²⁵ Confidential source, 3 February 2023.

²⁶ Asharq al-Awsat, *Compulsory Military Service Prompts Migration of Youths in Southern Syria*, 14 December 2022.

²⁷ Confidential source, 21 March 2023.

²⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 18.

²⁹ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *IS steps up attacks in Syrian desert region – monitor*, 31 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Three government troops 'killed by landmine' in Syria*, 14 July 2022; Sky News, *Islamic State still a threat and could once again seize power in parts of the Middle East like Syria, experts say*, 24 January 2023.

³⁰ The Badia covers several provinces: a large part of the province of Homs, the north-east of Hama, southern Raqqqa, and western Deir ez-Zor.

³¹ Confidential source, 3 February 2023.

³² The umbrella organisation of opposition parties, the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC), had set up the SIG in 2013. At that time, the SIG did not have a base in Syria and operated from abroad.

³³ Türkiye had achieved a military presence in those areas through the following military operations: * Operation **Euphrates Shield** in 2016: this area comprises the majority of the A'zaz, Al-Bab and Jarablus districts (in the province of Aleppo); * Operation **Olive Branch** at the beginning of 2018: this area practically comprises the entire Afrin district (in the province of Aleppo); * Operation **Peace Spring** at the end of 2019: this area comprises the Tel Abyad and Suluk subdistricts (in the Tel Abyad district, province of Raqqqa) and the Ras al-Ain subdistrict (in the Ras al-Ain district, province of Hasaka). See also Map 1.

³⁴ Confidential source, 4 May 2023.

The SNA has no central command structure and comprises a variety of armed groups with their own power areas and hierarchies. Inter-factional fighting within the SNA continued to occur during this reporting period (see §3.5.2). At times, factions within the SNA entered into sub-alliances with each other, also joined by non-SNA groups. Three Syrian rebel groups announced in February 2023 that they had formed a new alliance, the *al-Shahba* Gathering (*Tajammu al-Shahba*). This brought the *Ahrar al-Sham* group together with *Ahrar al-Tawhid* and the *Nour al-Din al-Zenki* Movement, which were part of the SNA. *Ahrar al-Sham* had previously joined forces with HTS, which dominated the province of Idlib (see §1.2.3).³⁵

1.2.3 *The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)*

The SSG de facto administered half of the province of Idlib (the north-west), a small part of the north-west of the province of Aleppo, and even smaller parts of the provinces of Latakia and Hama. The SSG is a civil authority set up in 2017 by the armed group *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), which has de facto power in the area. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (which grew out of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the Syrian branch of al-Qaida) has been designated a terrorist organisation by several countries and organisations.^{36,37} During the reporting period and even before, the HTS leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani,³⁸ seemed to be suggesting – certainly to the outside world – that he wished to break with his radical past and present himself as a moderate leader who was protecting minorities in SSG territory.³⁹ Al-Jolani appeared in a video on 2 January 2023 in which he said he rejected any form of reconciliation with the Assad government and intended to continue fighting until the – in his words – ‘criminal regime’ had been overthrown.⁴⁰

HTS was the dominant factor in the province of Idlib. The group accepted the Turkish military presence in the north, also in SSG-controlled territory,⁴¹ as a bulwark against Assad’s troops.⁴² In addition to HTS, a variety of other armed groups were active in the province of Idlib. HTS worked together with some of them, e.g. the SNA-affiliated National Liberation Front (NLF),⁴³ with which HTS had previously been in conflict. Armed confrontations took place with others⁴⁴ (see also §3.5.3).⁴⁵

³⁵ BBC Monitoring (YouTube), *Three Syria rebel groups form new alliance*, 3 February 2023; BBC Monitoring (Orient News TV), *Three killed, seven injured in rebel infighting in Syria's Azaz - Orient TV*, 21 January 2023.

³⁶ The United States, Russia, Türkiye and the UN Security Council.

³⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 25.

³⁸ Often spelled ‘Al-Jawlani’.

³⁹ The Syrian Observer, *Julani Visits Christians After Years of Persecution and Displacement*, 21 July 2022; confidential source, 3 February 2023.

⁴⁰ BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria jihadist group HTS showcases 2022 'military achievements'*, 7 January 2023; confidential source, 3 February 2023.

⁴¹ When Assad’s army advanced towards the city of Idlib at the beginning of 2020, and large groups of Syrian refugees again entered Türkiye, that country launched Operation **Spring Shield**, in which the Turkish army halted the Syrian army and pushed it back to some extent. Following the operation, the Turkish army set up observation posts and checkpoints in SSG-controlled territory in order to combat any new offensives by the Syrian army: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-spring-shield.htm>.

⁴² BBC Monitoring, *Analysis: Syria jihadists vow to defy Turkey-Syria deal*, 23 January 2023; confidential source, 31 January 2023.

⁴³ In August 2018, HTS entered into an alliance with the Turkish-backed NLF and the *Jaysh al-Izza* rebel group, named the *Al-Fatah al-Mubin* Operations Room: North Press Agency, *Government, Opposition Exchange Shelling In 4 Syrian Governorates*, 10 October 2022.

⁴⁴ These groups included some of a jihadist nature and some backed by Türkiye.

⁴⁵ Middle East Institute, *HTS, Turkey, and the future of Syria's north*, 26 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Jihadist-linked Syria force publishes 'confessions' of shadowy rival*, 20

1.2.4

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) was under the political control of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). This is a confederation of multi-ethnic political parties, associations, civil-society organisations and local activists, among which the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)⁴⁶ is dominant. The area is inhabited by Arabs and Assyrians among others, as well as Kurds.⁴⁷ According to BBC Monitoring, the AANES leaders – despite the charges of separatism by the Syrian government and the Turkish-backed opposition – repeatedly stressed that they were against the division of Syria. On the contrary, they demanded recognition of the multi-ethnic AANES authority within Syria's geographical borders.⁴⁸

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)⁴⁹ are the military wing of the SDC. During the reporting period, the US backed the SDF in operations against ISIS sleeper cells, among others, which were still active in the area. The US has military bases in the east of AANES territory.⁵⁰ Türkiye branded the SDF and its main units – the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) – as terrorist groups, arguing that they were official Syrian Kurdish extensions of the Turkish Kurdish rebel group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).⁵¹ The Syrian Kurdish groups in turn denied this.⁵²

As Map 1 shows, the AANES authorities did not have full control of the area, which included several enclaves controlled by the Syrian authorities, e.g. in the cities of Hasaka and Qamishli, and the airfield where Russian troops were stationed.⁵³ Troops of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the Russian army had a presence on the border with Türkiye.⁵⁴ In addition to the SDF, the SAA and Russian troops also had a presence in the area around the city of Manbij, in the west of AANES territory.⁵⁵ To what extent the various groups work together or coordinate their operations is not known. As far as could be ascertained, there was one armed confrontation between the SDF and the SAA during the reporting period (see §3.5.4).

December 2022; North Press Agency, *Government, Opposition Exchange Shelling In 4 Syrian Governorates*, 10 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria-based French militant faction mourns death of member*, 16 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Jihadist-linked Syria force publishes 'confessions' of shadowy rival*, 20 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *HTS justifies action taken against smaller Syria faction in Idlib*, 12 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria-based French militant faction mourns death of member*, 16 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (YouTube), *Three Syria rebel groups form new alliance*, 3 February 2023.

⁴⁶ *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* in Kurdish.

⁴⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country Of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022, 31 May 2022, pp. 20-21; <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/fact-sheet/> (downloaded 21 February 2023): this area was also inhabited by Turkmens, Chechens and Yazidis, among others.

⁴⁸ BBC Monitoring (Ronahi TV), *Kurdish leader says Ankara-Damascus deal will divide up Syria*, 21 January 2023.

⁴⁹ The SDF are referred to in Kurdish as *Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk*.

⁵⁰ Reuters, *Syria Kurds say they have resumed joint ops with U.S.-led coalition*, 5 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Syrian Kurdish-led forces 'detain' IS commander, two members*, 13 December 2022.

⁵¹ More background information on the PKK can be found in Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report on Türkiye, March 2021, p. 12.

⁵² BBC Monitoring (Rudaw TV), *Kurds say Turkish ground offensive threat still looming*, 17 January 2023.

⁵³ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022, 31 May 2022, pp. 20-21; <https://www.syriandemocraticcouncil.us/fact-sheet/> (downloaded 21 February 2023).

⁵⁴ France24, *Russia sends troop reinforcements to Kurdish-controlled northern Syria*, 1 December 2022.

⁵⁵ Daily Sabah, *Russian forces bolster military presence in NE Syria*, 5 July 2022.

Outside the contiguous AANES territory in the north-east of Syria there were still several AANES-affiliated enclaves in Aleppo, in both the city and province of that name. The neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah in the city of Aleppo, and dozens of villages around the city of Tel Rifaat in the north of the province of Aleppo,⁵⁶ were under the control of a Kurdish civilian council affiliated with the AANES. The Afrin Liberation Forces (ALF) were active in the enclave around Tel Rifaat. Although led by Syrian Kurds, they were not part of the SDF.⁵⁷ The Russian and Syrian armies had a presence in the enclave, alongside the ALF. To what extent the ALF were in contact with the Russians and the SAA is not known. The Syrian security apparatus had blockaded these Syrian Kurdish enclaves in Aleppo (see Chapter 2).⁵⁸

Precisely what relationship these enclaves have with the AANES administration is unclear, as is the extent to which ties are being maintained between the ALF and SDF.

1.3 Reconciliation mechanisms

1.3.1 Local reconciliation agreements

The Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022 considered the local reconciliation agreements in detail.⁵⁹ In some areas under opposition control, the Syrian authorities offered the population 'reconciliation agreements', which gave them control over those areas – referred to as 'reconciliation areas' – without further military struggle.⁶⁰ Generally speaking, a reconciliation procedure offered two options: either sign a reconciliation agreement and continue living⁶¹ in government territory, or move, in particular to opposition territory in north-west Syria. The reconciliation agreements were often only signed after months or years of bombing and in many cases siege.⁶²

Once reconciliation agreements had been signed, central negotiating committees were set up to maintain contacts with the Syrian authorities and the Russian army, which had acted as guarantor of many of those agreements. The committees included former rebel leaders, local lawyers, and leaders of the local tribes. In Daraa, for example, three central negotiating committees were set up, of which two

⁵⁶ Also known as the 'Shahba enclave'.

⁵⁷ Amnesty International, *Syria: Government forces must lift siege on civilians in predominantly Kurdish areas in Aleppo*, 24 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Syrian Kurdish group claims killing 14 Turkish soldiers, rebels*, 18 October 2022.

⁵⁸ BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Syrian Kurdish group claims killing Turkey-backed rebels in Aleppo*, 2 July 2022; Daily Sabah, *Russian forces bolster military presence in NE Syria*, 5 July 2022; confidential source, 31 January 2023.

⁵⁹ المصالحة اتفاقيات (*itifaqiaat almusalaha*) in Arabic, often referred to in English as 'reconciliation agreement'.

⁶⁰ The Astana process resulted in an agreement in May 2017 which laid down that 'de-escalation zones' would be set up in areas not controlled by the Syrian government, namely Idlib, parts of the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra, Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, and northern parts of the province of Homs. Reconciliation agreements were eventually signed in all the areas except Idlib, which for the most part remained under HTS control.

⁶¹ The former opposition area had now been ceded to the government, making it government territory.

⁶² Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, pp. 29-30; Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity (SACD), *Reconciliation agreements in Daraa are a Russian tactic used by the Syrian regime to liquidate its opponents*, 31 May 2022; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Is Russia Reneging on its Reconciliation Agreements in Syria?*, 16 November 2021; The Telegraph, *Syrian flag flying over onetime rebel stronghold Douma as Russians announce victory in Eastern Ghouta*, 12 April 2018.

– that in the city of Daraa and in Western Daraa – had been abolished, as they were ineffective and unable to do anything about the poor security situation in the province. Only the committee in Eastern Daraa⁶³ was still in existence during this reporting period, but its role and presence were unclear.⁶⁴

The local reconciliation agreements failed to improve the security situation in the areas concerned. The situation in reconciliation areas such as Daraa and Eastern Ghouta remained poor and unstable during the reporting period. Kidnappings, arrests and killings were common. Daraa saw assassinations of former rebel fighters, human rights activists and journalists, among others, and members of negotiating committees were also targeted. The perpetrators of many of these assassinations remained unidentified. Ninety per cent of the population in the reconciliation areas were said to feel unsafe because of the presence of Syrian security forces in their localities (see §3.5.1).⁶⁵

No new local reconciliation agreements were signed during this reporting period. One source indicated that such agreements were only signed once a rebel area returned to government control, which did not occur during the reporting period.⁶⁶ Reconciliation centres were sometimes set up in areas where a reconciliation process had already taken place, however. Individuals could initiate a reconciliation process there, e.g. because they had not signed a reconciliation declaration during the earlier local process (see below).⁶⁷

1.3.2 *Individual reconciliation agreements*

The Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022 also discussed the individual reconciliation agreements⁶⁸ that enabled civilians to rectify their status (when there had been an outstanding issue with the authorities)⁶⁹ with the Syrian authorities. According to that report, this apparently applied particularly to Syrians who wanted to return to Syria from abroad, but it could also apply to displaced persons wishing to return to an area under the control of the authorities. This remained unchanged during the current reporting period.⁷⁰ A confidential source

⁶³ Eastern Daraa is under the control of ex-rebel leader Ahmed al-Awda, whose fighters were incorporated in the Eighth Brigade of the Russian-backed Fifth Army Corps following the 2018 reconciliation agreement. Russia has relinquished control of the Eighth Brigade, however; it is now said to be collaborating with the Syrian military intelligence service.

⁶⁴ BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Syria opens 'settlement' office in Homs province*, 13 November 2022; Syria Direct, *Daraa negotiating committees gutted by assassinations, departures*, 1 September 2022; confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

⁶⁵ SADC, *Reconciliation agreements in Daraa are a Russian tactic used by the Syrian regime to liquidate its opponents*, 31 May 2022; Syria Direct, *Daraa negotiating committees gutted by assassinations, departures*, 1 September 2022; confidential source, 17 November 2022.

⁶⁶ Confidential source, 21 March 2023.

⁶⁷ Middle East Institute (MEI), *The spider of Khanasir and the rising star of Syria's Hussam Luka*, 8 December 2022; confidential source, 16 June 2023.

⁶⁸ وضع تسوية (*taswiyat wada*) in Arabic, referred to in English as 'status settlement'. This is a different process from security clearance (see §§4.3 and 10.4).

⁶⁹ Outstanding issues, according to a confidential source, could include not only the requirement to still do compulsory military service but also having taken part in opposition activities such as attending demonstrations and taking up arms against the state. They also included issues such as leaving a government job without resigning, or deserting from the army, according to that source. Non-payment of tax or other monies owed to the authorities could also be regarded as an outstanding issue. Some issues could theoretically be 'reconciled', according to that source, but in practice the Syrian authorities did not always do this: this was the case e.g. with deserters, according to that source: confidential source, 11 July 2023.

⁷⁰ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria* 2022, 31 May 2022, pp. 30-31; Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: (mofaex.gov.sy) (downloaded 23 March 2023); MEI, *The spider of Khanasir and the rising star of Syria's Hussam Luka*, 8 December 2022.

added that an individual reconciliation process could be initiated from abroad or from another control area, but it had to be completed in a government area. The document certifying an individual reconciliation would only be issued in a government area, according to that source.⁷¹

In addition to the above categories, Syrians living in areas controlled by the Syrian authorities could rectify their status at 'settlement centres'.⁷² Some of these centres dated back to 2018, but various new ones were set up in 2022. The centres were intended for anyone who was wanted by the authorities for some reason or another, but in particular for draft evaders and deserters from the government army, who were required to report back to their military units. The amnesties granted by the authorities to e.g. draft evaders and deserters aimed to induce people to report to the settlement centres.⁷³

Some people who had rectified their status at a particular centre and had their names removed from the wanted list, however, were then arrested or harassed by a government body other than the one responsible for the centre at their place of residence. In Daraa, the military intelligence service was responsible for issuing documents certifying that a person's status had been rectified. The document was headed 'Military and Security Committee of Southern Syria'. Another body, however, such as the air force intelligence service, could still have that person on a wanted list and refuse to recognise the document.⁷⁴ A confidential source noted that a person might actually attract the attention of the authorities by initiating an individual reconciliation process.⁷⁵ To what extent people who had rectified their status – or been reconciled with the Syrian authorities – subsequently encountered problems is not known.

⁷¹ Confidential source, 26 July 2023.

⁷² Referred to in English as 'settlement' or 'reconciliation centres'.

⁷³ SOHR, *SOHR Booklet*, January 2023, pp. 307-309; BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Syria opens 'settlement' office in Homs province*, 13 November 2022; confidential source, 21 March 2023.

⁷⁴ SADC, *Reconciliation agreements in Daraa are a Russian tactic used by the Syrian regime to liquidate its opponents*, 31 May 2022; confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 26 July 2023

⁷⁵ Confidential source, 26 July 2023.

2 Living conditions

General aspects

Of a total population of some 23 million,⁷⁶ about 6.8 million were internally displaced at the beginning of 2023. Almost ninety per cent of Syrians were living in poverty, and an estimated 15.3 million were in need of humanitarian aid in order to survive – the largest number of people in need since the start of the conflict.⁷⁷ Seventy per cent of Syrians were forced to borrow money in 2022 to meet their basic needs, while inflation continued to increase.⁷⁸ According to provisional figures from the Syrian authorities, inflation rose by 55% between December 2021 and September 2022. Since the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, the exchange rate for the Syrian pound (SYP)⁷⁹ had fallen by approximately 48% in relation to the American dollar, to about SYP 5,400 per dollar in November 2022.⁸⁰ Because of the downturn in the economic situation, more people were forced to seek work, especially those on the margins of the labour market with relatively poor earning capacity, including women, young people and the elderly. Child labour is thought to have increased enormously in recent years, although there are no precise figures available.⁸¹

The economy

The Syrian economy has displayed a downward trend in recent years. The gross national product (GNP) fell by 3.5% in 2022. What remained of the economy was divided up mainly among the Syrian elite and the security apparatus. Sources indicated that business people had joined the Fourth Division of the Syrian army, which is led by President Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad, in order to secure their trade. One source referred to the Syrian economy as one based on plunder, where no-one was interested in the greater good and everyone merely served their own interests. The drug trade, extortion and ransom money, and money from abroad had become major pillars of the Syrian economy. The government was said to have no money to start rebuilding the country.⁸² The World Bank stated that the economic crisis was aggravated by the economic instability in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon and Türkiye, and new American sanctions.⁸³

⁷⁶ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country> (downloaded 26 May 2023); <https://ocindex.net/country/syria> (downloaded 26 May 2023); <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/summaries> (downloaded 26 May 2023): estimates of the population range from 17 to 23 million, as no census has taken place in recent years because of the crisis in Syria. Most sources refer to a population of 23 million in 2023.

⁷⁷ The number of people in need of humanitarian aid in 2021 was still as high as 13.4 million, according to the OCHA.

⁷⁸ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/52/69,* 7 February 2023, p. 1; <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/about-ocha-syria> (downloaded 31 May 2023); BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *Relief group warns of 'imminent famine' in Syria*, 31 January 2023.

⁷⁹ The SYP is also referred to in Syrian common parlance as the 'Syrian lira'.

⁸⁰ The World Bank, *Syria Economic Monitor: Syria's Economy in Ruins After a Decade-long War (English)*. Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 17 March 2023, pp. 15-16.

⁸¹ The World Bank, *Syria Economic Monitor: Syria's Economy in Ruins After a Decade-long War (English)*. Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 17 March 2023, p. X; confidential source, 3 April 2023; Equal Times, *Thousands of children in Syria are being forced out of school and into hazardous work*, 29 August 2022.

⁸² Financial Times, *Syria's state capture: the rising influence of Mrs Assad*, 2 April 2023; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 18 May 2023.

⁸³ The World Bank, *Syria Economic Monitor: Syria's Economy in Ruins After a Decade-long War (English)*. Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 17 March 2023, p. 5.

The deterioration in basic amenities

The conflict that began in March 2011 had severe effects on both the safety and humanitarian situation of the civilian population. Access to basic services such as water supply, electricity and healthcare was reduced vis-à-vis the previous reporting period. During this reporting period, the average Syrian family had only three or four hours of electricity per day, and sometimes there would be none at all for 48 hours.⁸⁴ Throughout the country, only 65% of hospitals and 56% of public health centres were fully functional in 2022, and there was a shortage of doctors and nursing staff. As a result of the conflict and climate change, access to safe drinking water was a challenge: forty per cent less drinking water was available in 2022, compared with before the conflict. For the first time in years, another cholera epidemic⁸⁵ broke out in Syria at the end of August 2022. Just under 80,000 cases of cholera were recorded throughout the country in early January 2023.⁸⁶ Education also suffered as a result of the conflict, with one-third of schools damaged or completely destroyed. Just under two million children throughout Syria were not going to school. Teachers sometimes absented themselves because they could not afford public transport to school. Many civil servants were said to be staying at home regularly, because it was cheaper than going to work.⁸⁷

Regional differences

The deterioration in the humanitarian situation affected virtually the whole of Syria. The February 2023 earthquakes had made the situation even worse, particularly in the north-west of the country – where most of the internally displaced persons live (see §9.1.1). People lost the roof over their head – in some cases for a second time. A confidential source told the story of an elderly couple who had finally been able to move into a house after living for years in a tent: their housing situation had gone back to square one as a result of the earthquake.⁸⁸ Conversely, in some areas the situation was better than in the rest of Syria. Restaurants and supermarkets were open again in the centre of Damascus, where the street scene was almost as it had been before the conflict – especially once all the checkpoints had been removed from the city centre (see also §3.5.1). In the provinces of Latakia and Tartous, the average income was also said to be higher than in the rest of Syria. Sources indicated that these were areas inhabited mainly by people loyal to the government and Syrian dignitaries. In AANES territory, it was said that the area bordering Iraq in particular received regular supplies (of humanitarian aid) from that country, making the situation there somewhat better than in the rest of Syria. In this area – where oil was extracted and a lot of food was produced – the prices were also lower than in government territory.⁸⁹ The human rights organisation Syrian Network for

⁸⁴ European Commission, Syria, 16 June 2023: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/syria_en; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor reports increase in 'abandoned children'*, 22 December 2022; confidential source, 18 May 2023; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

⁸⁵ Cholera is caused mainly by drinking contaminated water.

⁸⁶ International Rescue Committee, *Syria: Spike in Cholera cases spells a new crisis*, IRC warns, 21 September 2022; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *First batch of cholera vaccines arrives in northwest Syria*, 19 January 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Syria health sector in crisis amid 'illegal' flight of doctors*, 5 October 2022.

⁸⁷ UNICEF, *Whole of Syria Educational Response*, 19 July 2022; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 31 January 2023.

⁸⁸ ICRC, *Syria: Urgent Action Needed to Address Humanitarian Needs*, 14 June 2023; The World Bank, *Earthquake undermines Syria's Economic Outlook, Compounding Dire Socio-Economic Conditions, and Internal Displacement*, 17 March 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023.

⁸⁹ Confidential source, 7 March 2023; confidential source, 4 May 2023; confidential source, 25 May 2023; The World Bank, *Syria Economic Monitor: Syria's Economy in Ruins After a Decade-long War (English)*. Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 17 March 2023, pp. 17-18; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

Human Rights (SNHR), however, reported in May 2023 that the situation in the north-east of Syria also remained cause for concern. The prices of food and fuel were apparently continuing to rise as a result of the local authorities' policy failures and the insecurity in the area.⁹⁰

Obstructing access to basic amenities and deliberate attacks on infrastructure

In some cases the Syrian authorities and security forces blockaded fuel and food supplies to other areas of control and to former opposition areas in government territory. For example, the Syrian security forces continued their blockade of the Syrian Kurdish enclaves in the province and city of Aleppo during the reporting period (see §1.2.4).⁹¹ Electricity or water supplies were not restored in previously opposition-held areas, where the infrastructure had largely been destroyed. Sources added that the Syrian authorities had no money for reconstruction, but it was mainly former opposition areas that were discriminated against when restoring infrastructure.⁹² To what extent the Syrian authorities otherwise prevented access to basic amenities in addition to the above examples is not known.

Following the February 2023 earthquakes, the various authorities concerned, such as the Syrian authorities and the Turkish-backed armed groups, were accused of withholding humanitarian aid and prioritising areas of their choice. The aid went to pro-government areas or families of SNA fighters, for instance, not to areas designated by the humanitarian organisations as priority.⁹³

No information was found during our research regarding targeted attacks by the Syrian security apparatus or its allies on the electricity or water infrastructure of the other areas of control. A camp housing internally displaced persons in SSG territory, however, was hit by a reportedly targeted attack by the Syrian army and its allies in November 2022 (see also §3.5.3).

⁹⁰ SNHR, *Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April 2023*, 5 May 2023, p. 4.

⁹¹ Amnesty, *Syria: Government forces must lift siege on civilians in predominantly Kurdish areas in Aleppo*, 24 January 2023; SNHR, *Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in April 2023*, 5 May 2023, p. 4; Financial Times, *Syria's state capture: the rising influence of Mrs Assad*, 2 April 2023.

⁹² Confidential source, 18 May 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

⁹³ Amnesty, *Syria: government forces and Turkey-backed armed groups have diverted earthquake aid*, 6 March 2023; De Volkskrant, VN: *Zelfs toegenomen hulp schiet ernstig tekort voor humanitaire crisis in noorden van Syrië*, 26 February 2023.

3 The security situation

3.1 The general situation

The armed struggle in Syria was no longer as fierce as a few years previously – when ISIS was still occupying areas of Syria, for instance –, but there was still infighting between various factions (see §1.2 and footnote 21). The main fighting during the reporting period took place at the borders of the various areas of control. These were not the only scenes of armed confrontations: there was also fighting between various armed organisations within the various control areas. In addition to the armed confrontations, the country was plagued with such things as kidnappings, enforced disappearances and assassinations, the perpetrators of which were not always clear.

3.2 Civilian casualties

Figures

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) each reported different figures for the number of civilian fatalities in 2021 and 2022. The SOHR reported slightly more civilian casualties due to the conflict in 2022 than in 2021: 1,627⁹⁴ in 2022 as opposed to 1,558⁹⁵ in 2021.⁹⁶ The SNHR, on the other hand, stated that fewer civilians had been killed in 2022 than in 2021: 1,057⁹⁷ in 2022,⁹⁸ as against 1,271 civilians who had died in Syria in 2021, according to the SNHR figures.⁹⁹ As during the previous reporting period, civilian deaths were due to various causes, mainly (targeted) shootings, but also air strikes, land mines and torture.¹⁰⁰

Figures from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)¹⁰¹ show that the number of fatalities due to 'violence against civilians'¹⁰² during the previous and current reporting periods fluctuated, and no clear trend is discernible (see Graph 1).¹⁰³

⁹⁴ These included 321 children under the age of 18 and 159 women over the age of 18.

⁹⁵ These included 383 children and 193 women.

⁹⁶ SOHR, *Lowest yearly death toll ever | 3,882 people killed across Syria in 2021*, 31 December 2021; SOHR, *Lowest annual death toll ever | 3,825 people killed across Syria in 2022*, 31 December 2022.

⁹⁷ These included 251 children and 94 women.

⁹⁸ SNHR, *1,057 Civilians, Including 251 Children, 94 Women, and 133 Victims Who Died due to Torture, Were Documented Killed in Syria, in 2022*, 1 January 2023, p. 7.

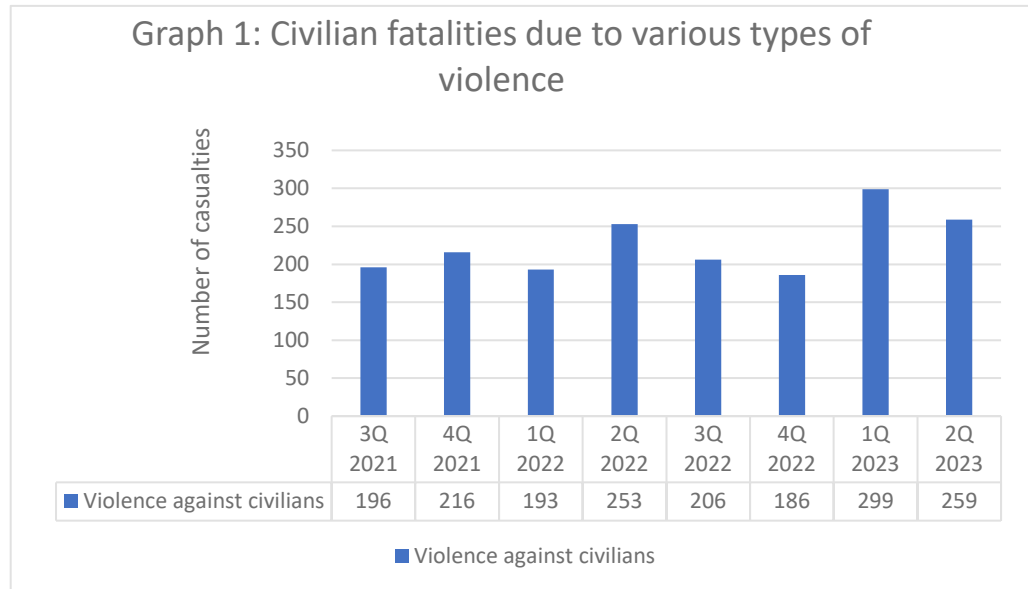
⁹⁹ SNHR, *Eleventh Annual Report: The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2021*, 21 January 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ ACLED collects information on the dates, actors, locations, fatalities and types of all reported political violence and protest events around the world.

¹⁰² ACLED includes both civilian casualties and those among the warring factions in the category of 'explosions/remote violence', hence it is difficult to assess the precise number of civilian casualties based on ACLED's categories. Although this category does include civilian casualties, it has not therefore been included in Graph 1.

¹⁰³ <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard> (downloaded 31 July 2023): If past incidents subsequently come to light, ACLED will include them, hence the numbers may continue to change.



As in the previous reporting period, the verified number of civilian casualties in this reporting period is a minimum. Given ACLED's conservative method of counting, the true number of casualties in each category is likely to be higher.¹⁰⁴

Parties responsible

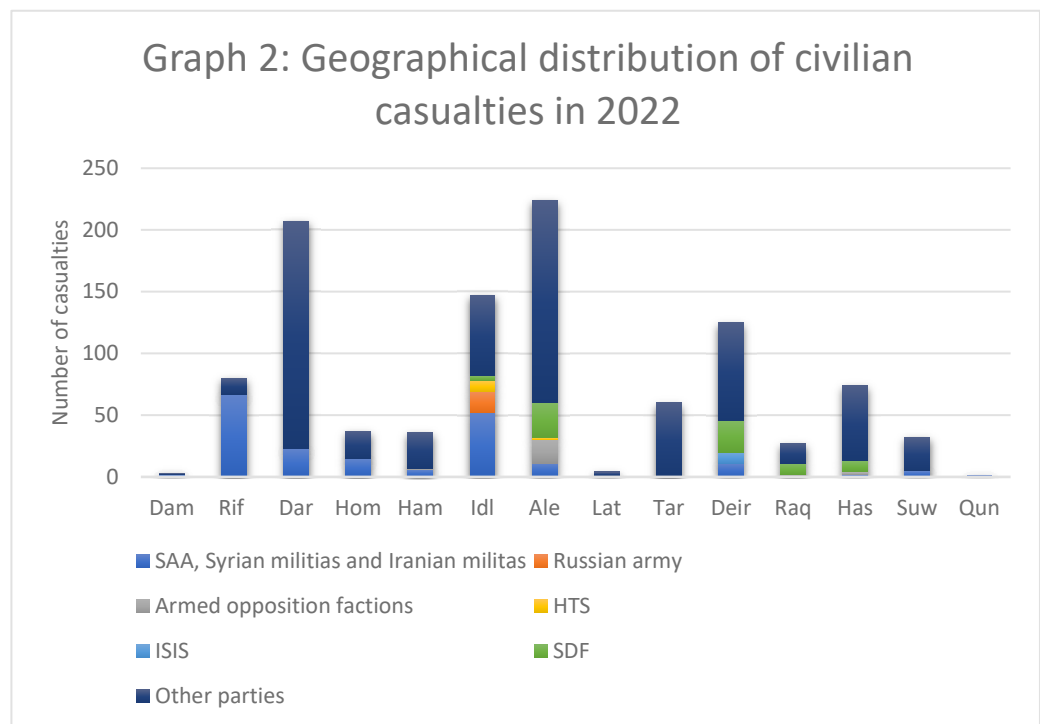
Of the 1,057 civilian casualties counted by SNHR in 2022, the SAA and militias accountable to it were responsible for 196, including 30 children and seven women. Russian troops killed seventeen civilians, including eight children and one woman. ISIS killed nine civilians in 2022, according to the SNHR. Eleven civilians, including two children and two women, were killed by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and the armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA) killed 24 civilians, including 7 children and 5 women. The Kurdish-led SDF killed 76 civilians, including 11 children and 6 women. Most civilian casualties, however, were due to violence perpetrated by groups other than those mentioned above, whose affiliation or ideology was not known.¹⁰⁵ There was an enormous increase in the number of civilian casualties at the beginning of 2023 due to the actions of ISIS. Dozens of people searching for truffles in the Badia desert died in ISIS attacks (see §3.5.1).

3.3 The geographical distribution of civilian casualties

The geographical distribution of civilian casualties in 2022 was as follows, according to the SNHR (see Graph 2):

¹⁰⁴ The majority of the data collected by ACLED is taken from secondary reports in the public domain, hence the true figures may be higher. Data on numbers of casualties can be prone to subjectivity and inaccurate reporting. ACLED states that it uses the most conservative estimates available: ACCORD (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation), *Sudan, year 2020: Update on incidents according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, p. 3, 23 March, 2021

¹⁰⁵ SNHR, *1,057 Civilians, Including 251 Children, 94 Women, and 133 Victims Who Died due to Torture, Were Documented Killed in Syria, in 2022*, 1 January 2023, p. 7.



As Graph 2 shows, Aleppo (Ale) had the most civilian casualties in 2022 (224), followed by Daraa (Dar) with 207, Idlib (Idl) with 147, and Deir Ez-Zour (Deir) with 125. The other provinces¹⁰⁶ had fewer than a hundred civilian casualties: Quneitra (Qun) and Latakia (Lat) had one and four civilian casualties, respectively, in 2022. The capital of Damascus (Dam) suffered three civilian deaths, according to SNHR figures.¹⁰⁷

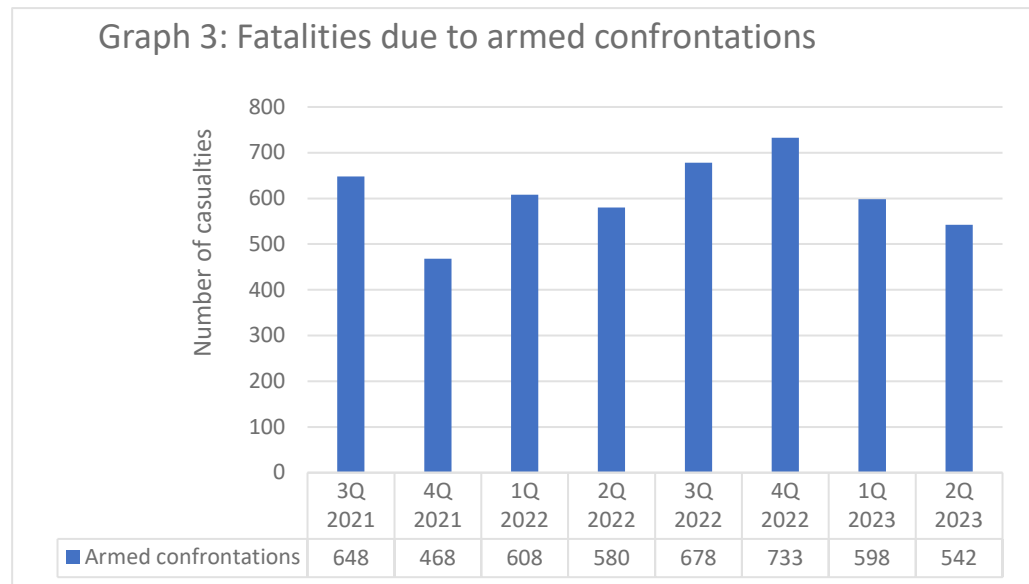
3.4 Casualties of armed struggle

As indicated above, the struggle was not as fierce as before, but there were still armed confrontations between the various armed factions during the reporting period. In the north-west there were armed confrontations between HTS and the SNA, and between HTS and the SAA and its allies. In the north-east there was fighting between the Turkish army and the SDF, and in government territory there was infighting between militias loyal to the government. ISIS was active particularly in the east of Syria, carrying out attacks on both the SDF and the SAA. We shall try to provide a general view of the various armed confrontations in the various areas of control in §3.5.

ACLED figures show that the figures for fatalities among the warring factions due to armed confrontations fluctuated during the past two reporting periods, but no clear decrease or increase is discernible (see Graph 3).

¹⁰⁶ The other provinces are Rif Damascus (Rif), Homs (Hom), Hamma (Ham), Tartous (Tar) and Hasaka (Has).

¹⁰⁷ SNHR, *1,057 civilians (...) were documented killed in Syria*, 1 January 2023, p. 11.



Here again it should be noted that ACLED only counted reported cases, and the true number of deaths due to armed confrontations is likely to be higher.¹⁰⁸

3.5 The security situation in the various areas of control

Below we outline the security situation in the various areas of control, and we shall attempt to indicate differences in the security situation within particular control areas. It should be noted here that the descriptions are not exhaustive; they are merely intended to provide a general view.

3.5.1 *The Syrian authorities*

The area controlled by the Assad administration was characterised by parts where there were regular upsurges in violence – in particular in Daraa and the area bordering SSG territory – and parts that experienced relatively little violence. As Graph 2 showed, the provinces of Daraa, Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zour were among the top four provinces with the most civilian casualties in 2022.¹⁰⁹ Damascus, Latakia and Quneitra, on the other hand, had the fewest civilian casualties in 2022. Sources described the capital of Damascus – in particular the centre – and large parts of the province of Latakia – apart from the area bordering SSG territory – as areas where the security situation was apparently stable, compared with the rest of Syria (see below).¹¹⁰ In spite of the low number of civilian casualties, Quneitra – which has a relatively small population – suffered high crime figures, numbers of attacks and confrontations between warring factions.¹¹¹

In the south-western province of Daraa, various factors affected the security situation. The province of Daraa was recaptured by the Syrian government in 2018 under a reconciliation agreement mediated by Russia (see §1.3.1). Unlike in other opposition strongholds, many former opposition fighters remained there instead of making enforced moves to rebel-controlled areas in the north. Some of them in eastern Daraa joined a newly formed government army unit, under Russian

¹⁰⁸ <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard> (downloaded 27 July 2023).

¹⁰⁹ It should be noted here that parts of Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zour are not under government control (see §1.2).

¹¹⁰ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023; confidential source, 1 May 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Casualties reported in HTS attack on Syrian troops in Latakia*, 14 January 2023.

¹¹¹ Confidential source, 1 May 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022; Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

supervision, known as the 'Eighth Brigade'.¹¹² The province nevertheless remained the scene of repeated waves of violence – often committed by unknown attackers against government forces and former opposition fighters – and of protests against President Assad and Iran. Attacks on Syrian army troops and former opposition fighters also caused civilian casualties. Former opposition fighters clashed with government forces, and various militias affiliated with the government feuded with each other. ISIS was also active in the province during the reporting period, claiming to have killed or wounded more than fifty people there in 2022, including government troops and Shiite militias, political activists and members of religious minorities. The then Caliph of ISIS, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, was killed in the city of Jasim in Daraa in October 2022. Who was responsible for his death is unclear: both armed former opposition forces and the Syrian army claimed responsibility. Dozens of ISIS members were said to have died in anti-ISIS operations by local armed groups.¹¹³

ISIS was also active in the Badia desert, operating in both the SDF-controlled and government-controlled areas.¹¹⁴ There ISIS attacked e.g. government forces, oil field workers – the region is rich in oil fields – and truffle hunters. Estimates of fatalities caused by ISIS in the Badia desert range from several dozen to several hundred.¹¹⁵ The SOHR reported in February 2023 that more than sixty civilians and seven government troops had died in a single ISIS attack on truffle hunters in the province of Homs. Because of the poor economic conditions, people were venturing further into the desert to find this expensive delicacy, and it was precisely in these remote areas that there were ISIS cells.¹¹⁶ ISIS cells were also active in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Raqqqa. Armed attacks, ambushes and IED¹¹⁷ explosions caused fatalities among government troops and members of militias loyal to the government.¹¹⁸

¹¹² In April 2019 the Eighth Brigade numbered 1,585 officially registered fighters solely from the governorate of Daraa. About 900 of them were former rebels of the Sunna Youth Forces from the city of Busra al-Sham and the surrounding area, whereas the total number of rebels involved in the uprising in Daraa exceeded 30,000: European University Institute, Al-Jabassini, A., *The eighth brigade – Striving for supremacy in Southern Syria*, 2021, pp. 6 and 8.

¹¹³ SADC, *Reconciliation agreements in Daraa are a Russian tactic used by the Syrian regime to liquidate its opponents*, 31 May 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: IS belatedly reveals attacks in Syria's south*, 19 January 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Killed senior IS member had previous links with Syrian army, rebels*, 21 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Syrian army losses reported in Aleppo, Deraa provinces*, 19 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *IS commander 'killed' in Syrian Deraa province*, 28 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *Officer killed, another missing after armed attack in Syria's Deraa*, 28 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *Officer killed, another missing after armed attack in Syria's Deraa*, 28 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *Syrian army claims credit for death of Islamic State leader*, 2 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Al-Arabi Al-Jadid), *Report says setting up a 'court' exposed IS presence in southern Syria*, 1 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Bomb defused in south Syria town after IS leadership message*, 1 December 2022.

¹¹⁴ BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Syria Kurdish-led fighters 'expand' operations against IS*, 6 January 2023. BBC Monitoring, *Syria calls Israeli strikes 'coordination with IS'*, 3 January 2023;

¹¹⁵ BBC Monitoring, *Syria calls Israeli strikes 'coordination with IS'*, 3 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *IS steps up attacks in Syrian desert region – monitor*, 31 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *At least 10 workers killed in attack near oil field in eastern Syria*, 30 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *IS kills three Syria soldiers in central desert*, 2 December 2022.

¹¹⁶ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Death toll from suspected IS attacks in Syria rises to 96*, 20 February 2023.

¹¹⁷ Improvised explosive device: this includes roadside bombs, for example.

¹¹⁸ BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *IS in Syria showcases recent attacks on army, promises more*, 23 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *IS belatedly claims killing Syrian army 'officers' in Aleppo*, 14 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Syria TV), *IS militants kill pro-Assad*

Iranian-backed militias were stationed on the border between SDF-controlled and Assad administration-controlled areas in the province of Deir Ez-Zour. Although they tried to strengthen ties with the local population, there were also tensions between the militias and the local population, which was generally a clan-based society. Deaths were also said to have occurred in confrontations between the two groups.¹¹⁹

Israel carried out regular air strikes during the reporting period – using both aircraft and rockets – on positions such as arms depots and training bases of the SAA, Hezbollah, Iranian-backed militias and the IRGC, among others.¹²⁰ Damascus and Aleppo airports were also hit. Several troops or militia members died in most of the attacks. The SOHR reported that it had documented 32 Israeli attacks on Syrian territory in 2022, in which 85 troops of various nationalities had reportedly died.¹²¹ Several Israeli attacks were also said to have hit civilian targets. Both Syrian state television and the SOHR reported that two civilian deaths had been suffered in an attack on Damascus in early April 2023.¹²²

The province of Suweida in the south of Syria was the scene of anti-government demonstrations. Local residents went out on the streets in December 2022 to protest against the deterioration in living conditions, with demonstrators setting an important government building on fire. Two deaths and eighteen injuries occurred in the Syrian authorities' crackdown on the demonstrations, according to the local press.¹²³ The province, which borders Jordan, was also an important transit point for drugs. Several drug traffickers died in fighting between traffickers and Jordanian border guards. The traffickers were apparently working for Hezbollah and Russian-backed government forces. A Jordanian army officer stated in 2022 that a drug war was taking place on the border between Jordan and Syria.¹²⁴ A Syrian drug trafficker, his wife and six children were said to have died in early May 2023 in a Jordanian air force attack in the east of Suweida.¹²⁵

Suweida, which is populated mainly by Druze, was also characterised by confrontations between local residents and pro-government militias. In July 2022, 17 deaths and 35 injuries reportedly occurred in clashes between the pro-government *Raji Falhut* militia and local residents backed by the armed Druze

Palestinian militias in Syria's Raqqa, 16 July 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Nine pro-Syrian government fighters said killed in clashes with IS*, 24 June 2022

¹¹⁹ BBC Monitoring (Twitter), *Iran-backed militiamen 'killed in landmine blast' in Syria*, 3 April 2023; Arab News, *Iran determined to keep Syria in a state of war*, 12 October 2022.

¹²⁰ The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps or *Pasdaran* is Iran's elite military force.

¹²¹ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Deaths reported in Israeli strike near Damascus*, 20 December 2022; The Times of Israel, *Syria says IAF strikes briefly put Damascus airport out of service, kill 2 soldiers*, 2 January 2023; Reuters, *Second Iranian Revolutionary Guard member dies after Israeli attack in Syria*, 2 April 2023.

¹²² SOHR, *SOHR: Two civilians killed in new Israeli strike on Syria*, 4 April 2023; France24, *Israeli air strike on Damascus kills two civilians, Syrian state media reports*, 4 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (Ynet Website), *Israeli media suggest Syrian missile hit building during strikes*, 19 February 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023.

¹²³ BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Fresh clashes reported in southern Syrian province of Deraa*, 14 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *'Calm returns' to Syrian province after protests*, 6 December 2022.

¹²⁴ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor confirms drug smugglers killed in Jordan border clash*, 28 November 2022; BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *Drug smugglers entering from Syria shot by Jordanian army*, 27 November 2022.

¹²⁵ Al Jazeera, *Jordan behind attack that killed drug trafficker in Syria: SOHR*, 8 May 2023.

faction *Rijal al-Karama* (the 'Men of Dignity'). The fighting broke out when the Raji Falhut militia abducted a local youth and the local population rose up in protest.¹²⁶

Israeli attacks on the province of Quneitra, which borders the Golan Heights occupied by Israel, reportedly caused several civilian casualties: these attacks were aimed particularly at Syrian army and Hezbollah targets in the province.¹²⁷ As in the neighbouring province, unknown gunmen carried out attacks on Syrian troops in Quneitra. At least two Syrian officers were said to have died in an attack of this kind on 19 April 2023.¹²⁸

Rebel groups regularly infiltrated government-controlled parts of the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia from SSG and SIG territory, causing dozens of deaths among government troops and those of pro-government militias (see also §§3.5.2 and 3.5.3).¹²⁹ A small part of the north of the province of Latakia, which is predominantly calm, is controlled by rebels (see §1.2.3). At times during the reporting period, rebel group fighters (of HTS and *Ansar al-Islam*, for instance) infiltrated government territory in Latakia and attacked government troops, causing several dozen deaths among them.¹³⁰ Several deaths occurred in clashes in summer 2022 between the Syrian army and a militia led by a relative of President Assad. The militia was apparently mainly engaged in illegal activities and wanted to extend its control to a part of Latakia.¹³¹

The Syrian authorities had removed all the checkpoints in the centre of the capital during the reporting period because of the improved security situation there.¹³² There were nevertheless incidents in and around the city during the reporting period. In addition to the Israeli air strikes, the Syrian capital suffered several attacks in and just outside it. An attack was carried out just outside it on a bus carrying SAA troops in October 2022, in which at least seventeen of them died, according to the SOHR. The SOHR did not mention any possible perpetrators.¹³³ A senior police officer died on 10 May in a car bomb explosion at a police station in the Barzeh neighbourhood in the north of the Syrian capital of Damascus, and ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack the same day.¹³⁴

3.5.2 *The Syrian Interim Government (SIG)*

The area administered by the SIG was characterised by surges of violence from various sides. The Turkish-backed SNA was involved in clashes with HTS, but there was also violent infighting between various factions, as well as clashes between the SNA and the SAA, the SDF and the ALF.

¹²⁶ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Deadly clashes reported in Syria's southern Sweida province*, 28 July 2022; Arab News, *At least 17 dead in rare clashes in Syria's Sweida*, 28 July 2022.

¹²⁷ BBC Monitoring (SANA TV), *Two civilians wounded in Israeli attack, Syria says*, 12 August 2022; BBC Monitoring (Ynet Website), *Israeli forces shoot Syrian at Golan perimeter fence*, 19 September 2022.

¹²⁸ BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Syria opposition website reports deadly attack on military officers*, 21 April 2023.

¹²⁹ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Eight Syrian army soldiers killed in Aleppo clashes*, 8 January 2023.

¹³⁰ BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Jihadist group claims attack 'behind enemy lines' in western Syria*, 9 April 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Casualties reported in HTS attack on Syrian troops in Latakia*, 14 January 2023.

¹³¹ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Clash reported in Syrian president's hometown blamed on relative*, 23 June 2022.

¹³² Confidential source, 7 March 2023

¹³³ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Several Syrian soldiers dead, wounded in blast near Damascus*, 13 October 2022.

¹³⁴ BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Officer killed in IS-claimed blast at Damascus police station*, 10 May 2023.

HTS invaded SIG territory a few times during the reporting period. An armed conflict broke out in October 2022, when the armed group *al-Jabha al-Shamiya* attacked the Al-Hamza Division (both groups were part of the SNA), which had been accused of murdering a local journalist and his wife. HTS came to the aid of the Al-Hamza Division, and the group entered the Afrin district of North Aleppo. More than sixty fighters died in the ensuing fighting – how many fatalities each faction suffered is not known – until a ceasefire was arranged by the Turkish army. HTS withdrew after the ceasefire, but it apparently left members behind at certain checkpoints in Afrin. The Turkish army built two military observation posts in order to make the border between Idlib and SIG territory easier to monitor.¹³⁵

In March 2023, HTS captured the city of Jindayris in the Afrin district, when Kurdish leaders asked the group for protection after five Kurds had been killed while celebrating Newroz.¹³⁶ The SNA faction *Ahrar al-Sharqiya* was accused of the killings, but leaders of the group denied any involvement.¹³⁷ A confidential source reported that HTS was taking advantage of the aid to the Kurdish population to gain control over more territory.¹³⁸ Fighting broke out at the beginning of 2023 between various SNA factions in the Syrian city of Azaz in North Aleppo, causing several deaths and injuries. Whether these were fighters or civilians is unclear.¹³⁹

Clashes between the SAA and Turkish-backed SNA factions also caused deaths and injuries during the reporting period. This fighting frequently took place on the border between SIG territory and the area where both the SDF/ALF and the Syrian army had a presence (see §1.2.4).¹⁴⁰ In November 2022, five Syrian government soldiers died in the north of Aleppo in Turkish shelling, according to the SOHR.¹⁴¹ There were also clashes between the ALF on the one hand and the Turkish army and SNA on the other, causing various deaths and injuries on both sides.¹⁴² SDF bombing of the city of Jarabulus in North Aleppo reportedly injured four members of the Turkish-backed Islamic group *Ahrar al-Sham*.¹⁴³

¹³⁵ SOHR, *After hours of alarming calm | HTS attacks positions of Al-Jabha Al-Shamiyah on Kafr Janna frontline*, 14 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Hurriyet), *Turkish journalist says Ankara 'tightening monitoring' over HTS in Syrian Northern Syrian regions facing 'uncertainty' amid power shifts, says website*, 26 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Northern Syrian regions facing 'uncertainty' amid power shifts, website says*, 20 October 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: HTS withdraws militants from Syria's Aleppo after rebel infighting*, 19 October 2022.

¹³⁶ The Persian New Year, which is celebrated e.g. in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan on the date of the spring equinox.

¹³⁷ SOHR, *Syria's HTS 'takes over' Jindayris from Turkey-backed rebels*, 21 March 2023.

¹³⁸ Confidential source, 6 April 2023.

¹³⁹ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Artillery fire wounds eight in rebel-held north Syria*, 20 January 2023.

¹⁴⁰ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Casualties reported in northern Syria clashes*, 7 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor reports Turkish shelling of two villages in Aleppo*, 24 December 2022.

¹⁴¹ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor says over 60 killed in Turkish aerial campaign*, 25 November 2022.

¹⁴² BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Syrian Kurdish group claims killing 14 Turkish soldiers, rebels*, 18 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Syrian Kurdish group claims killing Turkey-backed rebels in Aleppo*, 2 July 2022.

¹⁴³ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *UK monitor reports shelling by Kurdish-led, Turkish forces in northern Syria*, 15 October 2022.

ISIS was also active in the area, although the terrorist organisation tended to use it as a hiding place rather than an area of operations. The US carried out air strikes on ISIS targets in the area, killing several leaders.¹⁴⁴

3.5.3 *The Syrian Salvation Government (SSG)*

SSG territory was characterised mainly by fighting between HTS and Syrian government troops, often backed by the Russian air force. There was also a struggle between HTS and rival rebel groups in the area (see below).

HTS carried out various attacks from SSG territory on Syrian government forces' positions in Idlib, Aleppo and Latakia (see also §3.5.1), with the group claiming to have killed more than ninety government soldiers at the end of 2022. Several deaths and injuries also occurred on the HTS side in the attacks. According to the SOHR, HTS had started escalating the struggle with the Syrian government at the end of 2022.¹⁴⁵ In their turn, Syrian government forces also invaded SSG territory and carried out bombing in the area. The Syrian Arab Army was backed in the attacks by the Russian air force.¹⁴⁶ Ten deaths occurred in a rocket attack by the Syrian army in October 2022, including eight civilians. The rockets landed in temporary camps for internally displaced persons, because HTS fighters were stationed in the area. The Syrian army had deliberately targeted the camp, according to a confidential source.¹⁴⁷

HTS was engaged in a struggle with rival rebel movements in SSG territory during the reporting period: the group arrested members of smaller rebel movements – some of them Turkish-backed – in the area.¹⁴⁸ In May 2023, HTS faced protests about the arrest and detention of members of the rival Islamic organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and opposition activists. Some of the demonstrators were arrested by HTS on charges of anti-HTS sedition on behalf of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ VOA News, *'Top Five' IS Leader in Syria Killed in US Drone Strike*, 12 July 2022; BBC Monitoring (Syria TV), *Syrian media name senior IS member injured in US strike*, 20 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Anadolu News Agency), *Turkey arrests 18 'terrorists' in northern Syria, – interior ministry*, 5 December 2022; ABC News, *Islamic State leader killed while on motorcycle by US drones Russia had 'harassed': Officials*, 9 July 2023.

¹⁴⁵ BBC Monitoring (Syria TV/SOHR), *'HTS attack' kills number of Syrian government soldiers*, 10 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Syrian army losses reported in Aleppo, Deraa provinces*, 19 January 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Casualties reported in HTS attack on Syrian troops in Latakia*, 14 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Jihadist group HTS kills nine Syrian government forces – monitor*, 24 December 2022.

¹⁴⁶ North Press Agency, *Government, Opposition Exchange Shelling In 4 Syrian Governorates*, 10 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Fifteen Syrian soldiers 'killed' by jihadist group in Idlib*, 22 December 2022; Al Monitor, *Russian warplanes hit targets in northwest Syria*, 15 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *Syria army says 'dozens of terrorists' killed in north*, 29 June 2023.

¹⁴⁷ France24, *Ten killed in Syria regime rocket strikes: monitor*, 6 November 2022; confidential sources, 31 January 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Middle East Institute, *HTS, Turkey, and the future of Syria's north*, 26 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Jihadist-linked Syria force publishes 'confessions' of shadowy rival*, 20 December 2022; North Press Agency, *Government, Opposition Exchange Shelling In 4 Syrian Governorates*, 10 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria-based French militant faction mourns death of member*, 16 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Jihadist-linked Syria force publishes 'confessions' of shadowy rival*, 20 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *HTS justifies action taken against smaller Syria faction in Idlib*, 12 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria-based French militant faction mourns death of member*, 16 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (YouTube), *Three Syria rebel groups form new alliance*, 3 February 2023.

¹⁴⁹ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Syrian militant group faces unrest over detentions of rivals*, 8 May 2023; The New Arab, *Syria: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham arrests four women in campaign against jihadist group*, 24 May 2023.

ISIS cells were also active in SSG territory, but they did not carry out any attacks there during this reporting period, as far as could be ascertained. In November 2022, HTS arrested several alleged ISIS militants suspected of having prepared a bomb attack on a church in Jisr al-Shughour.¹⁵⁰ The US killed al-Qaida militants in air strikes on SSG territory. In June 2022, a leader of *Hurras al-Din* (HaD, Guardians of Religion), the Al-Qaida branch in Syria, died in a US air strike. In February 2023, another HaD member died in HTS-controlled territory in a US drone strike.¹⁵¹

3.5.4

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

The AANES area suffered mainly from attacks by the Turkish army. Türkiye continued to threaten to carry out a ground offensive against the SDF during the reporting period. In three previous ground offensives the Turkish army, along with Syrian allies – most of whose factions were now part of the SNA – had gained a presence in parts of the north of Syria that had previously been under SDF control (see also §1.2.2).¹⁵² No ground offensive materialised during the reporting period, but Türkiye did carry out regular air strikes on AANES territory, hitting both military and civilian targets.¹⁵³ There were occasional clashes between SDF/AFL on the one hand and the Turkish army and its allies on the other in the border areas between AANES territory and the area controlled by Türkiye. How many deaths occurred on both sides is not known. The SDF claimed responsibility for the deaths of twenty Turkish soldiers and pro-Turkish fighters at the end of November 2022.¹⁵⁴

Following a lethal explosion on 13 November 2022 in the centre of Istanbul, for which the Turkish authorities held the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) responsible,¹⁵⁵ the Turkish army launched Operation Claw-Sword on 19 November 2022, in which the Turks substantially increased the numbers of air and drone strikes. In the first week of the operation, 67 people died in air and drone strikes, including dozens of civilians, according to the SOHR. The SDF and the Syrian army, which both had a presence in AANES territory, reported casualties in their ranks due to the Turkish attacks.¹⁵⁶ The Turkish air and drone strikes continued in 2023, killing several civilians and soldiers.¹⁵⁷

The SDF and the US-led international coalition carried out regular operations against ISIS cells in the AANES area during the reporting period. In January 2023, more

¹⁵⁰ BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria jihadists HTS announce capture of IS militant cell*, 23 November 2022.

¹⁵¹ BBC Monitoring, *Syria jihadist group HTS 'raided home of US strike target'*, 30 June 2022.

¹⁵² BBC Monitoring, *Syria Kurdish forces enact draft amid Turkey strikes*, 13 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Orient News TV), *Russia, Syria deploy reinforcements to northern Syria*, 1 December 2022.

¹⁵³ BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Syrian Kurdish agency says two civilians killed in Turkish drone strike*, 27 September 2022; BBC (Hawar News Agency), *Kurdish outlet says 16 Syrian soldiers reported killed in Turkish attack*, 16 August 2022.

¹⁵⁴ BBC Monitoring (SDF Website), *Kurdish forces kill six Turkey-backed rebels in north Syria clashes*, 25 November 2022; BBC Monitoring (Ronahi TV), *Syrian Kurdish ALF group claims 'retaliatory' attacks against Turkish military*, 22 November 2022.

¹⁵⁵ Both organisations denied any involvement in the bombing.

¹⁵⁶ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor says over 60 killed in Turkish aerial campaign*, 25 November 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor reports Turkish shelling of two villages in Aleppo*, 24 December 2022; BBC Monitoring, *OPERATION CLAW-SWORD*, 28 November 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *War monitor says five Syrian soldiers killed following Turkish strike*, 27 November 2022; BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Kurdish outlet says Turkey carried out 78 attacks on Kobane this year*, 22 November 2022.

¹⁵⁷ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Casualties reported in northern Syria clashes*, 7 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Roadside bomb blast injures one in Syria's Qamishli*, 5 December 2022.

than 150 ISIS suspects were arrested in the province of Hasaka, suspected mainly of kidnappings and extortion.¹⁵⁸ ISIS increased the number of attacks in AANES territory – as it did in government territory – at the end of 2022.¹⁵⁹ ISIS claimed to have killed more than ten soldiers in attacks on the *Asayish* (the Syrian Kurdish security forces) at the end of 2022. Following an attack on an *Asayish* barracks on 26 December 2022, the Raqqa city authorities imposed a curfew.¹⁶⁰ Tens of thousands of relatives of ISIS members and persons displaced from former ISIS territory are being held in the al-Hol camp in the province of Hasaka. The AANES authorities are said to have little control over what goes on in the camp and to regard it as a security risk for the region. Dozens of women in the camp were killed by ISIS loyalists – also mainly women –, because in the view of ISIS they had stopped adhering to the correct religious doctrine, for instance, or they were suspected of spying for the Syrian Kurdish authorities.¹⁶¹

In some AANES areas the SDF, the Russian army and the Syrian army were operating alongside one another. It is unusual for the SDF to fight with other armies, but clashes broke out between it and the Russian army-backed Fifth Corps of the SAA in the east of Deir Ez-Zour in April 2023, apparently causing two deaths, one on each side. The SOHR stated that a confrontation of this kind between the two groups had never occurred before.¹⁶²

The US, which has bases particularly in the east of AANES territory, accused Iranian-backed militias of firing rockets at its bases there, but these did not cause any casualties, as far as could be ascertained. The US-led coalition attacked Iranian targets in the province of Deir az-Zour as retribution for the attacks.¹⁶³

3.6 Crime in the various control areas

Absence of the rule of law and impunity for crimes – committed mainly by organisations and individuals affiliated with the Assad administration – created an environment where criminality could flourish.¹⁶⁴ Crime in Syria has risen in recent years: whereas the country ranked 34th in the Numbeo crime index¹⁶⁵ of countries

¹⁵⁸ BBC Monitoring (SDF website), *US-backed SDF forces arrest 150 IS suspects in Syria*, 7 January 2023.

¹⁵⁹ BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Syria Kurdish-led fighters 'expand' operations against IS*, 6 January 2023.

¹⁶⁰ BBC Monitoring (al Naba Newspaper), *IS boasts of impact of recent attack on Syrian Kurdish base*, 30 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Al Yawm TV), *Syrian Kurdish forces launch 'Operation Thunderbolt' against IS*, 29 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Outlet says Kurdish policeman killed, two injured in east Syria IS attack*, 29 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (AANES Facebook), *Syrian Kurdish forces impose curfew in Raqqa after IS attack*, 27 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *IS claims attack on Syria Kurds in Raqqa to 'avenge' detainees*, 26 January 2022.

¹⁶¹ Kurdistan24, *Second Yezidi woman liberated during al-Hol campaign*, 13 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Syrian Kurdish forces detain al-Hol camp escapees after 'Turkish strikes'*, 24 November 2022; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Beheaded woman's body found in Syria's Al-Hol camp*, 25 June 2022.

¹⁶² BBC Monitoring (Baladi News), *Two die in 'rare' clash between Kurdish force, Russia-backed unit in Syria*, 13 April 2023.

¹⁶³ BBC Monitoring (Step News Agency), *Syrian media report on rocket strike targeting US base*, 4 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Militia fighters held in Syria for 'collusion' with coalition*, 21 September 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Numbeo describes itself as the world's largest cost of living database. It also manages databases on quality of life: housing indicators, perceived crime figures, quality of healthcare, quality of transport, and other statistics.

with the highest crime figures in 2014, it occupied 8th position in 2023.¹⁶⁶ That made Syria the country with the highest crime figures in the region. Neighbouring Lebanon, for example, ranked 70th, followed by Iraq in 71st place.¹⁶⁷ Syria ranked 11th in the World Population View crime index in 2023, again making it the country with the highest crime figures in the region.¹⁶⁸

Corruption, bribery and nepotism were widespread in Syria. Groups affiliated with the Assad administration, such as Hezbollah, the Fourth Division (an elite unit of the Syrian army) and Iranian-backed militias, exerted substantial control over the transnational criminal markets, e.g. drugs, arms and human trafficking. The groups affiliated with the state also provided criminal groups with weapons and ensured, for instance, that their members were not arrested. Some pro-government groups, such as the *Shabiha* and the National Defence Forces,¹⁶⁹ are known to have employed mafia-style tactics and to have been involved in a broad range of criminal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, and drug and people trafficking.¹⁷⁰

Many groups were active throughout Syria, including armed groups such as the SNA and ISIS, tribal militias and family firms involved in criminal activities. Whereas large criminal groups were generally more violent and involved in a range of criminal markets such as drug and people trafficking, small criminal groups usually operated at local level and were mainly involved in kidnapping and extortion.¹⁷¹

Leading members of the Syrian armed forces and relatives of President Assad are said to be closely involved in the production and trafficking of the drug Captagon.¹⁷² Trade in Captagon is thought to be providing billions for the Syrian state.¹⁷³ Syria imports a lot of drugs, as well as producing some itself. Many young people, seeing no future in the war-torn country, have had recourse to drugs. Sources indicated that the number of drug users has risen alarmingly. Drug users have committed crimes such as theft and robbery to meet their daily needs.¹⁷⁴ In SSG territory, where HTS held sway, drug use is said by a confidential source to be far less, and the drug trade is smaller than in the rest of Syria.¹⁷⁵

It is not possible to make a straightforward comparison between the various areas, given the absence of specific crime figures.

¹⁶⁶ The overall crime rate is calculated by dividing the total number of reported crimes of any kind by the total population and multiplying the result by 100,000.

¹⁶⁷ https://www.numbeo.com/crime/rankings_by_country.jsp?title=2023 (downloaded 24 May 2023).

¹⁶⁸ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country> (downloaded 24 May 2023).

¹⁶⁹ Armed groups loyal to the Assad administration.

¹⁷⁰ <https://ocindex.net/country/syria> (downloaded 24 May 2023), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Al-Assad Regime's Captagon Trade*, 6 October 2022; SJAC, *The State of Justice in Syria*, March 2023, pp. 9-10; Financial Times, *Syria's state capture: the rising influence of Mrs Assad*, 2 April 2023.

¹⁷¹ <https://ocindex.net/country/syria> (downloaded 24 May 2023); confidential source, 6 April 2023.

¹⁷² Captagon is a highly addictive amphetamine-type drug that has ravaged the Middle East in recent years.

¹⁷³ BBC, *Syria: New Captagon drug trade link to top officials found*, 27 June 2023; RTL Nieuws, *Narcostaat Syrië overspoelt Midden-Oosten met drugspillen*, 4 March 2023.

¹⁷⁴ BBC Monitoring (Asharq al-Awsat), *Saudi paper says Damascus transforming from drug route to hub*, 12 July 2022; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Confidential source, 3 February 2023.

3.7 Attacks, extrajudicial executions and killings

Organisations responsible

The Syrian security apparatus and militias affiliated with the Syrian government were linked with extrajudicial executions and killings during the reporting period. The United States Department of State (USDoS) stated in its annual report for 2022 that the Syrian government carried out extrajudicial executions and was responsible for the deaths of large numbers of civilians in the areas controlled by the Assad administration, without giving precise numbers.¹⁷⁶ ACLED, SOHR and SNHR figures for the numbers of civilian casualties show that no clear increase or decrease was discernible during this reporting period vis-à-vis the period covered by the previous report. These figures related to all civilian casualties; to what extent they included extrajudicial executions is not known (see §3.2).

Other actors in the conflict, such as the Turkish army, the SNA, ISIS, HTS and the SDF, were also involved in extrajudicial executions.¹⁷⁷ It is unclear, however, for how many such executions they were responsible.

Important targets

Many attacks on military personnel of the Syrian army, human rights activists, civil servants and former opposition fighters were carried out in Daraa in particular during the reporting period (see also §3.5.1). The *Al-Monitor* newspaper reported in August 2022 that attacks had been common in the region since the reconciliation treaty in 2018, but a marked increase was discernible in 2022. Sources consulted corroborated the increase in targeted attacks in Daraa.¹⁷⁸ Precise figures for these attacks could not be given, however, nor was it clear precisely who was behind them. In many cases responsibility for them remained unclaimed, or the perpetrators were not found and arrested. ISIS claimed responsibility for killing just under fifty government officials and government supporters in Daraa between April and October 2022.¹⁷⁹

In September 2022, the media activist Muhammad Abdul Latif (also known as Abu Ghannoum) and his wife were assassinated in the city of al-Bab in the SIG area. Abu Ghannoum had criticised the Al-Hamza Division and other groups affiliated with the SNA. Although the Al-Hamza Division was identified as the organisation responsible for the attack, no suspect was arrested and brought to court, as far as could be ascertained.¹⁸⁰

The above examples are not exhaustive; they merely represent an attempt to provide a picture.

¹⁷⁶ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 4 and 6; North Press Agency, *HTS executes 19 people in Syria's Idlib since early 2023*, 20 April 2023; The Jerusalem Post, *Turkey accused of killing Kurdish female commander in Syria*, 28 July 2022.

¹⁷⁸ *Al-Monitor*, *Who's to blame for ongoing assassinations in Syria's Daraa province?*, 10 August 2022; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

¹⁷⁹ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: IS belatedly reveals attacks in Syria's south*, 19 January 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Syria Direct, *'Accountability, or fall': Syrian National Army's Hamza Division under fire after assassination of opposition activist in northern Aleppo*, 12 October 2022; The New Arab, *Syria: Prominent activist and pregnant wife killed in northern city of Al-Bab*, 8 October 2022.

3.8 Disappearances and kidnappings in the various control areas

It is not possible to give precise figures for disappearances and kidnappings in the various areas of control, but many sources agreed that kidnapping had become a revenue model for various organisations in Syria.¹⁸¹ SNHR figures for arbitrary arrests and detentions¹⁸² in the past two years do not show any clear increase or decrease: the figure has remained between 135 and 230 cases per month since 2021.¹⁸³

The Syrian authorities and pro-government militias in particular have been linked with practices of this kind. People were abducted arbitrarily¹⁸⁴ and only released once their relatives had paid a ransom to the kidnappers.¹⁸⁵ A militia with alleged links to the Syrian army kidnapped 46 people who were on their way from Damascus to Lebanon in December 2022, according to the SOHR. Some of the kidnap victims were said to have been released on payment of a ransom of 3,500 dollars. The militia is apparently known for its illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom.¹⁸⁶ Kidnappings took place throughout the area controlled by the government, but Daraa was particularly hard hit during the reporting period.¹⁸⁷ People were abducted arbitrarily, but sources reported that it was mainly rich business people who were the target of kidnappings in government territory. Even those loyal to the Assad administration were held for ransom by the Syrian security apparatus or militias affiliated with the government.¹⁸⁸

Other parties in government territory and other areas of control – e.g. criminal gangs, the SNA and ISIS – kidnapped civilians and local government officials during the reporting period for ransom or in order to exchange them for organisation members who had been detained. To what extent this took place is unclear.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸¹ Confidential source, 6 April 2023; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023; UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 5.

¹⁸² SNHR includes enforced disappearances here, as these are the eventual result of many arrests.

¹⁸³ <https://snhr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/detainees-and-enforced-disappearances-monthly-reports/page/2/>

¹⁸⁴ Examples of reasons for holding people for ransom were that they were not carrying valid documentation, they were on a wanted list, because a neighbour had made an accusation against them, but in many cases because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

¹⁸⁵ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 5; confidential source, 8 May 2023; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 31 January 2023.

¹⁸⁶ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor says close to 50 people held for ransom*, 16 December 2022.

¹⁸⁷ SADC, *Reconciliation agreements in Daraa are a Russian tactic used by the Syrian regime to liquidate its opponents*, 31 May 2022; BBC Monitoring (Syria TV), *Tensions high in Syria's Daraa after killing, arrests*, 6 May 2023.

¹⁸⁸ Confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023; Le Monde, *In Syria, businesses experience extortion from Bashar Al-Assad's regime*, 18 January 2023.

¹⁸⁹ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 18; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Smugglers in Syria take hostage 26 members of Kurdish-led force*, 3 October 2022; BBC Monitoring (SDF website), *US-backed SDF forces arrest 150 IS suspects in Syria*, 7 January 2023; confidential source, 6 April 2023.

3.9 Arrests and detentions of civilians in the various control areas

3.9.1 *Numbers and organisations responsible*

The authorities of the various areas of control were all linked to arbitrary¹⁹⁰ arrests and detentions of civilians. The SNHR announced in January 2023 that it had documented at least 2,221 cases of arbitrary arrest or detention in 2022. It counted 1,882 and 2,189 cases of arbitrary arrest or detention, respectively, in Syria in 2020 and 2021.¹⁹¹

The Syrian authorities were responsible for the vast majority of arbitrary arrests: 88% of the arbitrary arrests in 2022 were said to have been perpetrated by them, according to the SNHR.¹⁹² The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) stated in August 2022 that arbitrary detention – with victims also dying as a result of e.g. torture and abuse – remained systematic in government territory.¹⁹³ Although responsible for fewer arbitrary arrests than the Syrian authorities, HTS, the SNA and the SDF were also responsible for practices of this kind.¹⁹⁴

Precise figures for the nature and numbers of human rights violations are not known, given the lack of information and monitoring mechanisms in the Syrian prison system. The SNHR stated in November 2022 that about 7,500 people who had been arbitrarily arrested between 2011 and October 2022 had been released under the guise of an amnesty by the Syrian authorities. The human rights organisation added that 135,253 people were still being held in Syrian detention centres and prisons for political reasons.¹⁹⁵ Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated in March 2023 that it was impossible to give a precise figure for the number of persons missing since the outbreak of the conflict,¹⁹⁶ but the true number was most likely to be far in excess of 100,000.¹⁹⁷

3.9.2 *The main reasons for arrests and detentions*

As the report for 2022 stated, the Syrian authorities were closely monitoring so many groups that large sections of the population ran the risk of being regarded as belonging to suspected groups. Opponents of the authorities could be arrested at any time. Precise reasons for arrests and detentions were not given.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁰ 'Arbitrary' here means that civilians were unable to give any reasons for their arrest or detention.

¹⁹¹ SJAC, *The State of Justice in Syria 2023*, March 2023, p. 10; <https://snhr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/detainees-and-enforced-disappearances-monthly-reports/> (downloaded 30 May 2023).

¹⁹² SNHR, *At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 Children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December*, 3 January 2023, p. 1; <https://snhr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/detainees-and-enforced-disappearances-monthly-reports/> (downloaded 30 May 2023).

¹⁹³ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 1.

¹⁹⁴ SNHR, *At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 Children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December*, 3 January 2023, p. 1; UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, pp. 10-11.

¹⁹⁵ SNHR, *Breaking Down the Amnesty Decrees Issued by the Syrian Regime Between March 2011 and October 2022*, 17 November 2022.

¹⁹⁶ Including people missing as a result of incommunicado detention.

¹⁹⁷ OHCHR, *Türk calls on UN General Assembly to establish new, independent institution on missing persons in Syria*, 28 March 2023.

¹⁹⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, pp. 74-75.

The above was also true of the current reporting period. Because of the arbitrary nature of the arrests it is impossible to provide a clear picture of when one could take place. Many of them were carried out without the slightest legal foundation and with no independent judiciary, often by security services beyond the reach of the judiciary. Anyone regarded by the Syrian authorities as an opponent of or threat to those in power ran the risk of being arrested.¹⁹⁹ Sources indicated that people were also arrested by the Syrian authorities purely and simply in order to demand a ransom for their release. Other reasons for possibly being arrested included draft evasion, false accusations by e.g. neighbours, and receiving money from relatives living abroad. Many Syrian families were reliant on these remittances, which were a major source of foreign currency for the authorities. Obtaining money through illegal intermediaries or failure to exchange the foreign currency for Syrian pounds could result in arrest.²⁰⁰

The SNHR stated that the other parties to the conflict also engaged in practices of this kind, albeit on a far smaller scale and less systematically.²⁰¹ HTS restricted freedom of expression by arbitrarily arresting journalists and activists, according to the August 2022 COI report.²⁰² Arbitrary arrests and detentions also took place in north-east Syria. The COI report focused particularly on the just under 58,000 individuals, including about 17,000 women and 37,000 children, who it said were being detained unlawfully in the Al-Hol and Roj camps.²⁰³²⁰⁴ A confidential source reported that these camps contained many people who had been arrested merely for being in the last ISIS strongholds when they were recaptured by the SDF. They had no other ties with the terrorist group, according to that source.²⁰⁵

3.9.3

Prison conditions

The humanitarian situation in Syria also impacted the conditions in detention centres and prisons. The conditions in prisons and detention centres in Syria were reportedly poor – in many cases even life-threatening – due to food shortages, overcrowding, physical and mental abuse, and inadequate sanitary facilities and medical care. The ICRC stated that places with a high population density, such as detention centres and camps for displaced persons, were particularly vulnerable to diseases such as cholera²⁰⁶ due to the absence of safe water supplies.

¹⁹⁹ SNHR, *At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 Children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December*, 3 January 2023, p. 1; UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, pp. 10-11; confidential source, 8 May 2023.

²⁰⁰ Confidential source, 8 May 2023; confidential source, 14 March 2023; Synaps, *Picking empty pockets*, 8 July 2020.

²⁰¹ SNHR, *At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 Children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December*, 3 January 2023, p. 1.

²⁰² UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 10.

²⁰³ Al Hol and Al Roj are camps in the province of Hasaka housing displaced persons and foreign nationals – people of various nationalities who have proven or alleged ties with ISIS. The camps are managed by the AANES and under the control of the SDF.

²⁰⁴ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 16.

²⁰⁵ Confidential source, 31 January 2023.

²⁰⁶ ICRC, *Syria and Lebanon hit by cholera: Preventing the collapse of essential infrastructure is imperative to avoid devastating health and humanitarian consequences*, 3 November 2023; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 2, 11-12.

3.10 Torture by the Syrian authorities

In March 2022, the Syrian government passed Law No. 16, which made torture a criminal offence. It did not guarantee any redress for former victims of torture, however, or provide effective mechanisms to prevent repetition.²⁰⁷ As far as could be ascertained, no-one has yet been charged with or sentenced for torture since the law was passed. SNHR figures show that the Syrian authorities have not ceased their torture practices since March 2022. According to the SNHR, 133 people died as a result of torture in 2022 – about twenty more torture fatalities than in 2021.²⁰⁸ Syrian security forces were responsible for 115 of the 133 deaths. HTS, the various SNA factions and the SDF were responsible for one, three and fourteen deaths due to torture, respectively.²⁰⁹ The SNHR also reported in 2023 on fatalities due to torture by the various organisations.²¹⁰

The methods of torture to which prisoners in Syrian detention centres were subjected include the 'tyre' (*dulab*), whereby the victim is folded double in a vehicle tyre and beaten with batons; hanging from the ceiling (*shabeh*); administering electric shocks to the genitals and anal region; whipping; pulling out fingernails; burning with cigarettes; beating the soles of the feet with the prisoner tied to a table (*falaqa*); tying the victim to a folding wooden board and enclosing them in it while administering electric shocks to them (*bisat al-rih* or the 'flying carpet'); burning the genitals and anus with hot metal; torturing other prisoners in front of the detainee; and threatening the detainee with the torture and/or sexual assault of their relatives. In some cases the torture caused the death of the victim (see above).²¹¹

The torture often began on a person's arrest and continued during their detention. The Syrian authorities, for example, tortured people because of their alleged ties with the opposition, or in order to induce them to talk. A government official could start torturing a detainee on the slightest pretext. According to a confidential source, the threshold for turning to torture had not changed since the start of the conflict – when government officials even tortured children. Torture by government officials continued to go unpunished. It is difficult, therefore, to give a precise description of the reasons for torture, and where, when and what kind of torture was practised.²¹²

²⁰⁷ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 5; Amnesty, *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2022/23 THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS*, 27 March 2023, p. 353; Syrian for Truth & Justice, *Syria: Anti-Torture Law Issued 35 Years After the Convention against Torture Went Effective*, 12 July 2022.

²⁰⁸ In 2021, 104 people died as a result of torture, according to SNHR figures.

²⁰⁹ SNHR, *1,057 Civilians, Including 251 Children, 94 Women, and 133 Victims Who Died due to Torture, Were Documented Killed in Syria, in 2022*, 1 January 2023, p. 14; SNHR, *1,271 Civilians, Including 299 Children, 134 Women, and 104 Victims of Torture, Killed in Syria in 2021*, 1 January 2022.

²¹⁰ <https://snhr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/> (downloaded 30 May 2023).

²¹¹ BMC Psychiatry, *The Syrian regime's apparatus for systemic torture: A qualitative narrative study of testimonies from survivors*, 13 December 2022, pp. 2 and 15; UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 4.

²¹² Confidential source, 4 May 2023; confidential source, 8 May 2023; confidential source, 18 May 2023.

3.11 Bribes and ransoms related to arrests, detentions and kidnappings

Extortion and blackmail were among the motives behind arrest and detention operations by the Syrian security services and militias affiliated with the government, which were largely autonomous and at liberty to exploit the population in the areas that they controlled. Bribes and ransoms are said to have become a major pillar of the Syrian economy. In most cases families paid money in exchange for information about their relatives, or to have them released. Fraud and blackmail networks, mainly sponsored by security services, were widespread in government territory. Relatives are also said to have paid ransoms for people who had disappeared or already died – often during detention. The money was paid to government officials, including judges, or intermediaries. In some cases a family paid thousands of dollars to have their relative released.²¹³

It is not possible to provide a clear picture of the kinds of people for whom ransoms had to be paid. Local residents could be detained at a checkpoint, e.g. for not having the correct papers, but even business people loyal to the Syrian government fell victim to kidnapping by the Syrian security apparatus or militias and were only released on payment of a ransom (see also §3.8).

²¹³ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 5; confidential source, 8 May 2023; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 31 January 2023.

4 Freedom of movement

4.1 Freedom of movement between control areas

As the previous report stated, it was not practically possible for civilians to travel freely from government territory to SSG or SIG territory or vice versa, nor to travel from AANES territory to SIG territory. Travel between the two opposition areas of the SSG and SIG was possible, however. Some travel may have been possible from government territory to AANES territory, but the precise requirements for this were unknown. Residents of Hasaka and Qamishli and people born there were among those able to travel from government territory to these two cities in the AANES area, as the authorities have some presence there. Also, people living in government territory who came from the parts of Raqqqa and Deir az-Zour provinces that were now under AANES control were reportedly able to travel to and fro to check their property or cultivate land.²¹⁴

The situation regarding the transport of goods was different from that regarding the movement of people, according to the report. Commercial transportation of agricultural products (e.g. olives) took place from government territory to other parts of Syria, for instance.²¹⁵

The above situation remained virtually unchanged during the current reporting period. It should be noted here that, according to various sources, any border within Syria could be crossed as long as bribes were paid to the border guards of the various authorities. The amounts ranged from several hundred to several thousand dollars. A confidential source claimed that a person had travelled illegally from Lebanon to Idlib through government territory for 6,000 dollars.²¹⁶ The borders between the various areas of control were so porous that ISIS cells, for example, were able to move between them.²¹⁷

As regards travel between AANES territory and government territory, it can be added that there was air traffic between Qamishli and Damascus airports. This air link has existed for some considerable time, but precisely when it started is not known.²¹⁸ There were also bus services between AANES and government territory.²¹⁹ On the other hand, the Syrian authorities blocked access to and from the AANES enclaves in the city and province of Aleppo (see §1.2.4).²²⁰

A confidential source reported that it was possible in some cases to travel from SSG territory to government territory under the supervision of the authorities on both sides.²²¹ In September 2022, for example, HTS opened a road between two towns in

²¹⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 16.

²¹⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 16.

²¹⁶ Confidential source, 27 April 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2022; confidential source, 3 April 2023.

²¹⁷ ICG, *Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria*, 18 July 2022.

²¹⁸ <https://chamwings.com/where-we-fly/> (downloaded 11 May 2023)

²¹⁹ Confidential source, 25 May 2023.

²²⁰ BBC Monitoring (Hawar News Agency), *Kurdish media accuses Syrian forces of imposing 'blockade' in Aleppo province*, 22 August 2022; Amnesty, *Syria: Government forces must lift siege on civilians in predominantly Kurdish areas in Aleppo*, 24 January 2023.

²²¹ Confidential source, 3 April 2023.

the province of Idlib, which, according to a news medium, could be regarded as a commercial border crossing²²² with government areas. The SOHR reported that this might have been a consequence of the reconciliation centres set up by the Syrian government in Idlib province for the voluntary return of internally displaced persons from SSG to government territory. The SOHR noted here that most displaced persons in SSG territory had refused to return to government territory.²²³ To what extent this took place between government territory and other areas of control has not been ascertained.

4.2 Checkpoints

The Syrian Constitution guarantees freedom of movement, but the Syrian government, HTS and other armed groups restricted internal freedom of movement by setting up checkpoints throughout the country.²²⁴ The density of checkpoints differed from one region to another, but it is not possible to provide a picture of the differences. There are more checkpoints in former opposition areas that are now back under the control of the Syrian government than in the areas that have always been controlled by the Assad administration.²²⁵ As compared with the previous reporting period, various sources noted that many checkpoints in the capital of Damascus had been removed, and there were now hardly internal checkpoints there. The city of Latakia had not had internal checkpoints for years, according to a confidential source. It was necessary to pass through a major checkpoint to enter the city, but there was freedom of movement within it.²²⁶

As the previous report noted, civilians had to pass through many checkpoints in practice when travelling within the country. In doing so, they ran the risk of being detained, forcibly conscripted for military service or subjected to extortion, and that risk continued to exist during the current reporting period.²²⁷ Some men of military service age who did not want to sign up had not ventured far from their homes for years, as they were afraid of being arrested at a checkpoint.²²⁸ A confidential source also reported that there had been many cases of sexual intimidation of women and girls at checkpoints.²²⁹ Sources reported that, in order to pass through a checkpoint without too many problems, civilians – regardless of factors such as origin, age and religion – usually had to pay a small amount to the official on duty.²³⁰

4.3 Documents required

The Syrian authorities checked people's identity documents at checkpoints to ascertain whether they were wanted for military service or by one of the security services.²³¹ A person who suspected that the Syrian authorities were somehow looking for them on account of an outstanding issue could initiate an individual

²²² No indication is given of precisely what is meant by 'commercial'.

²²³ BBC Monitoring (Step News Agency/SOHR), *HTS group in Syria's Idlib opens road to government-held area*, 24 September 2022.

²²⁴ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 18.

²²⁵ Confidential source, 21 March 2023

²²⁶ Confidential source, 1 May 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023

²²⁷ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 16.

²²⁸ Confidential source, 31 January 2023.

²²⁹ Confidential source, 8 May 2023.

²³⁰ Confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 1 May 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

²³¹ Confidential source, 8 May 2023.

reconciliation process before travelling to government territory from another area of control. Initiating a reconciliation process did not always enable the person to travel to government territory without problems (see also §1.3.2).

A Syrian internally displaced person would also need security clearance if they wanted to travel to government territory from another area of control and reclaim property or obtain government documents. Security clearance meant that the person was not on a Syrian security forces wanted list.²³² No clear picture of the precise procedure for obtaining security clearance was gained during the research for this report (see also §§9.1.4 and 10.4).

To what extent the areas of control outside government territory have their own identity documents and require them for travel within the particular area is not known. On 14 September 2022, the authorities of the SSG area announced that residents there could register for a new identity card. To what extent the SSG area and other control areas require particular documents before allowing people to travel from government territory to those areas, however, is not known.²³³

²³² Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *What about the Return of IDPs to Areas Controlled by the Syrian Government?*, 9 June 2022.

²³³ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Jihadist-backed Syrian authority rolls out ID cards*, 19 September 2022.

5 Human rights

5.1 Freedom of expression

5.1.1 *Freedom of expression in the various control areas*

Freedom of expression in Syria was highly restricted.²³⁴ The government of President Assad amended the Syrian Penal Code in March 2022, thus increasing its mandate to enable certain groups – in particular civilians with dissenting opinions or opposing the Syrian government – to be prosecuted more easily, according to the NGO Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ).²³⁵

Syria scored one point for both 2022 and 2021 on Freedom House's Global Freedom Score,²³⁶ which measures the various freedoms in a country, thus designating it 'Not free'. This rating placed Syria lowest on the freedom index, along with South Sudan.²³⁷ Syria rated 175th among the 180 countries evaluated on the Reporters without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index,²³⁸ with a score of 27.22 points for 2022. It had scored 28.94 points for 2021, placing it 171st.²³⁹

It is not possible to provide a clear picture of the differences in freedom of expression between the various areas of control. Sources reported that it was highly restricted in all the areas and that the authorities cracked down hard on criticism. The AANES area was generally described as slightly more open than the other control areas, but freedom of expression was suppressed even there. People critical of the authorities of the AANES area were arrested and detained arbitrarily, as in the other areas.²⁴⁰

5.1.2 *Opinions or utterances that the Assad government could regard as criticism*

Freedom House stated that the Syrian government heavily monitored private and online discussions and punished people for dissenting opinions in the areas under its control.²⁴¹ Sources agreed that there was little if any space in Syria for criticism of

²³⁴ Amnesty, *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2022/23 THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS*, 27 March 2023, p. 353; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 53-54; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 17 May 2023); BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syrian journalist and wife shot dead in Aleppo province*, 7 October 2022.

²³⁵ STJ, *Syria: Penal Code Amendments End the Spaces Left for Freedom of Opinion and Expression*, 20 May 2022.

²³⁶ This index is compiled by totalling points for various factors such as press freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of organisation, and freedom of religion. The maximum score is 100 points.

²³⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 15 May 2023); the index has not yet been updated for 2023.

²³⁸ This index is compiled by validating various indicators (political context, legal framework, economic context, socio-cultural context and security) so as to gauge the freedom with which journalists are able to operate in a country. It is based on assigning a score of 0–100 to each country or area, 100 being the best possible score (the highest possible level of press freedom) and 0 the worst possible.

²³⁹ <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2023> (downloaded 16 May 2023): the index had not yet been updated for 2023.

²⁴⁰ Amnesty, *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2022/23 THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS*, 27 March 2023, p. 353; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 53-54; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 17 May 2023); BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syrian journalist and wife shot dead in Aleppo province*, 7 October 2022; BBC, *Syria Media Guide*, 19 April 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Syria militant group accused of arresting journalists at protest*, 27 June 2023.

²⁴¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 15 May 2023).

the Syrian government or opinions other than those of the authorities. Criticisms were nevertheless expressed, e.g. of the Syrian government's economic policy and the tax system, mainly by people in quarters loyal to President Assad. They found it easier to express criticism than people from areas previously under opposition control, for instance, who were more closely monitored and dealt with more harshly. Everyone – regardless of affiliation – complained about the taxes, according to a confidential source, but few people dared to broadcast this criticism in public or express it online. The Cyber Crime Law passed in April 2022 had made it easier for the Syrian authorities to tackle and punish online criticism. It was impossible to criticise the President or his family in public, and harsh measures were in place to deal with such criticism.²⁴²

5.1.3 *Space for possible criticism*

Sources reported that civilians had been silenced as a result of the years of repression in Syria. Many people critical of the Syrian authorities had left or been arrested and detained. The risk of being arrested and tortured had led many civilians to resort to self-censorship for their own safety.²⁴³

Criticisms of social issues were expressed in the various areas of control: there was criticism of tax policy, the Syrian authorities' response to the February 2023 earthquakes, and the deterioration in economic conditions. There were protests in SSG and SIG territory against the attempts at rapprochement between Türkiye and the Assad administration. Sources agreed that if an individual kept their criticism general and did not bring it to the fore, there were no consequences as a rule. Direct public criticism of people or organisations responsible for administering the various areas of control, or of armed organisations that had control over a particular area, could lead to reprisals. A media activist and his wife were assassinated, for instance, for allegedly criticising the Al-Hamza Division (see also §3.5.2).²⁴⁴

In the case of protests in which criticism was expressed, the various authorities of the control areas generally responded with violence, causing deaths and injuries (see also §5.2).

5.1.4 *The profiles of opponents and alleged opponents*

Given the arbitrary nature of arrests and other abuses, it is not possible to provide a clear picture of when the Syrian authorities would label someone as an opponent and what reprisals particular opposition activities would entail. The mere fact that a person had left Syria during the conflict could lead the authorities to regard them as an opponent. An individual could be arrested on the slightest pretext during this reporting period, and little had changed in comparison with previous years, according to various sources.²⁴⁵

As noted above, there was little space for opposition activities in the other areas of control either. To what extent the authorities of those areas took action against

²⁴² Confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 53; Amnesty, *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2022/23 THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS*, 27 March 2023, p. 353.

²⁴³ Smex, *Legalizing Control Of Personal Data And Online Discourse In Syria*, 7 July 2022; confidential source, 29 March 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

²⁴⁴ Confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syrian journalist and wife shot dead in Aleppo province*, 7 October 2022; Middle East Eye, *Syrians react furiously to Turkey's call for reconciliation with Assad*, 13 August 2022.

²⁴⁵ Baladi News, *'It's Your Turn, Doctor' The Words that Changed Syria Forever*, 7 June 2016; confidential source, 4 May 2023; confidential source, 29 March 2023; confidential source.

various opposition activities is unclear. During the reporting period, HTS, for instance, particularly targeted members of other armed groups operating in Idlib, so as to retain its hegemony in the area. It was even more difficult to provide a picture as regards the SIG area, as various SNA factions were in charge there and sources indicated that it comprised a variety of mini-states (see also §1.2.2).²⁴⁶

5.1.5 *Clarity regarding risks on or after returning to Syria*

Security clearance and individual reconciliation are discussed in §§1.3.2, 4.3 and 10.4. Security clearance shows that a Syrian wishing to travel to government territory is not on a Syrian security forces wanted list. Individual reconciliation is required if a person wishing to return to government territory has an outstanding issue with the Syrian authorities, e.g. they still need to do their compulsory military service. Even people with security clearance or an individual reconciliation sometimes encountered problems with the Syrian authorities on or after returning to Syria, however.

As far as could be ascertained, the other areas of control do not have such means of identifying possible risks for returnees.

5.1.6 *Other reasons for detention, torture and disappearance (of returnees)*

People were sometimes arrested for financial reasons during this reporting period. Business people – regardless of their loyalty to the Assad government – were arrested by the Syrian security apparatus for offences such as incorrect record-keeping, and only released after ransoms or bribes were paid. A soap opera producer was detained because the Syrian authorities considered that he had not declared the profits from the series, and he had to pay money to be released. The Syrian economy had become one based on plunder, according to confidential sources. The Syrian authorities seized every opportunity – including detaining people so as to demand ransoms – to earn money (see Chapter 2).²⁴⁷

5.1.7 *Past opposition activities*

Sources indicated that the Syrian authorities were not in the habit of forgiving and forgetting issues from the past. Past activities – e.g. taking part in a demonstration in the early stages of the conflict – could be raked up and cause problems for a person, possibly for a second time. The Syrian authorities took advantage of past activities to detain people so as to demand ransoms. It was not the case that the authorities had kept a record of all past opposition activities, but a person might report a neighbour or relative for a past activity, in order to take revenge or settle a dispute in their favour, for instance.²⁴⁸

5.1.8 *Risks to relatives of political opponents and critics*

Sources indicated that relatives of political opponents and of human rights activists had encountered problems with the Syrian authorities, who arrested them without a formal charge, detained them for lengthy periods, and in some cases tortured them.²⁴⁹ One source indicated that the main reason for the authorities to target

²⁴⁶ BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Head of jihadist-backed Salvation Government in Idlib 're-elected'*, 25 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Pro-HTS video criticises 'deviant' Hizb ut-Tahrir*, 7 December 2022; confidential source, 6 April 2023; confidential source, 4 May 2023.

²⁴⁷ Confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023; confidential source, 16 June 2023.

²⁴⁸ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 29 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

²⁴⁹ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 25; confidential source, 8 May 2023.

relatives was to ascertain where the opponents and human rights activists were living, or to make them cease their activities.²⁵⁰

Syrians who had returned to Syria from abroad were interrogated by the Syrian security apparatus about their relatives who were still living abroad.²⁵¹ Many Syrian refugees who still had relatives in Syria were disinclined to speak out against the Assad administration, as they did not want to cause problems for them. Refugees would sometimes not contact a Syrian diplomatic mission abroad for fear of adverse consequences for their relatives still living in Syria.²⁵² Family members who made inquiries in Syria about a relative who had been arrested for alleged opposition activities sometimes found themselves in difficulties, being regarded as opponents of the Syrian government.²⁵³

The extent to which relatives of political opponents or of human rights activists encountered problems depended on the profile of the political opponent or human rights activist. If a person was very outspoken abroad and campaigned vehemently against the Syrian government, there was a greater risk of their relatives in Syria encountering problems.²⁵⁴ One source, however, indicated that relatives would only be interrogated and otherwise left alone if they could prove that they had not been in contact with their activist or opposition relatives for a long time, or said that they had distanced themselves from them.²⁵⁵

5.1.9

Social media monitoring

The Syrian authorities frequently arrested civilians – including students, civil servants and lawyers – who had expressed criticism on social media of the corruption and difficult living conditions in government areas. They were charged with the general offence of ‘undermining the morale of the nation’ and a range of other charges under the Cyber Crime Law passed in April 2022.²⁵⁶

The Syrian authorities made use of modern technologies obtained mainly from Iran and Russia to monitor the social media accounts of opposition members and human rights activists, among others. Hundreds of computer specialists were said to have been employed to filter and monitor social media. Sources indicated that the Syrian authorities relied heavily on human informants in Syria, in addition to technical monitoring. A good deal of information on alleged criticisms still came from people reporting other people to the authorities. On what scale this took place, and whether it also occurred in other countries, is not known.²⁵⁷

Whether the Syrian authorities carried out more or fewer arrests in response to criticism on social media than during the previous reporting period is not known.

²⁵⁰ Confidential source, 8 May 2023.

²⁵¹ Refugee Protection Watch, *Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming*, 8 December 2022, p. 29; confidential source, 10 March 2023; confidential source, 14 March 2023.

²⁵² Confidential source, 31 January 2023; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 62-63.

²⁵³ Confidential source, 29 March 2023; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 25.

²⁵⁴ Confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023; BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syrian journalist and wife shot dead in Aleppo province*, 7 October 2022.

²⁵⁵ Confidential source, 10 March 2023.

²⁵⁶ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 55; confidential source, 8 May 2023; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 15 May 2023)

²⁵⁷ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 55; confidential source, 8 May 2023; confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 29 March 2023; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 15 May 2023)

Sources agreed that the new Cyber Crime Law and the amendments to the Penal Code had increased the scope for the authorities to crack down hard on criticism.²⁵⁸

Sources reported that criticism was also monitored in the other areas of control, but they could not say to what extent and how efficiently. According to a confidential source, HTS did not have monitoring equipment and had to rely mainly on human informants to monitor critical and opposition voices.²⁵⁹

5.1.10 *Mobile phone traffic monitoring in the various areas of control*

The Syrian government tried to monitor mobile phone traffic within and from Syria. To what extent it was capable of doing so, and what facilities it had for this purpose, is not known. Most mobile traffic is carried over apps such as MS Teams, WhatsApp and Signal, which are more difficult to monitor than ordinary telephone traffic because of the safety protocols in force.²⁶⁰ The Syrian security apparatus and groups loyal to the Assad administration – e.g. the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA)²⁶¹ – therefore used spyware and other malware in attempts to hack the mobile phones of human rights activists, opposition members and journalists so as to monitor their activities.²⁶²

People were also sometimes asked at checkpoints in Syria to hand in their phones, which were then checked to see whether they contained criticism of the Syrian government.²⁶³

Registration of SIM cards

In order to obtain a SIM card, a buyer had to register at the shop where it was purchased, according to a confidential source. The card was activated once registration was complete. There were ways of obtaining a SIM card without having to give your name: sometimes a person would buy a card for someone else, or show a false identity card in order to register. The confidential source noted that many shop owners had not been trained to distinguish false identity cards from real ones.²⁶⁴

The Turkish mobile network was used in the Turkish-controlled areas and parts of SSG territory. To what extent Turkish SIM cards could be bought in those areas, and whether that could be done without registration, is not known.²⁶⁵

5.2 **Freedom of demonstration**

The Syrian Constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly, but the law gives the government wide-ranging powers to restrict that freedom. Criticism of the government in large-scale demonstrations in government territory had virtually ceased during the reporting period. The authorities were also very keen to suppress

²⁵⁸ Timep, *Understanding Assad's New Cyber-Crackdown in Syria*, 5 October 2022; confidential source, 29 March 2023.

²⁵⁹ Confidential source, 2 February 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Protest after Syria jihadist group HTS 'arrests TikTok personality'*, 27 June 2022.

²⁶⁰ Confidential source, 7 March 2023; confidential source, 10 March 2023.

²⁶¹ The Syrian Electronic Army was set up immediately after the outbreak of the conflict in Syria in March 2011 by computer specialists loyal to Assad. It tries to hack the computer network systems of organisations regarded as a direct risk to the Syrian authorities. By means of these hacks it attempts to collect information on possible Syrian opponents.

²⁶² USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 56.

²⁶³ Confidential source, 29 March 2023.

²⁶⁴ Confidential source, 14 March 2023.

²⁶⁵ Confidential source, 2 February 2023.

any potential demonstrations as quickly as possible. ACLED did not record any deaths due to state-sponsored violence during protests in this reporting period.²⁶⁶ People no longer ventured out on the streets to protest in the majority of government territory for fear of reprisals, according to a confidential source: the government's response to demonstrations in the early days of the conflict was still fresh in their minds.²⁶⁷

In Daraa and Suweida in particular – provinces where government forces were less in control – there were still a few anti-government demonstrations during the reporting period. People went out on the streets in the city of Jasim in Daraa at the end of 2022 to demonstrate against the Syrian government, chanting anti-government slogans and demanding the release of political prisoners. The Syrian authorities responded to the protests with gunshots, injuring several civilians.²⁶⁸ Residents in the province of Suweida continued to protest sporadically in 2022 against the deterioration in economic conditions. According to Freedom House, a demonstrator and a police officer died in protests in Suweida in December 2022. *Enab Baladi*²⁶⁹ reported that a civilian had been gunned down in protests in Suweida in December 2022.²⁷⁰

Demonstrations were more common in AANES territory and opposition areas than in government territory. These were usually peaceful, and the authorities left the demonstrators alone. It should be noted here that many of these demonstrations were not against the interests of the local authorities; many of them targeted Turkish military activities in the area, for example.²⁷¹

Demonstrations were sometimes violently nipped in the bud in both AANES territory and opposition areas. In April 2023, STJ stated that all the dominant factions in Syria continued unabated to deny fundamental rights to freedom of opinion, expression and assembly.²⁷² According to ACLED data, Turkish-backed security forces shot a demonstrator dead in June 2022 in the province of Aleppo during demonstrations against the high electricity prices in the province; another source referred to two deaths.²⁷³ Since the second half of 2022, people in the north-west of Syria – estimates range from hundreds to thousands of demonstrators – went out on the streets to demonstrate against the attempts at rapprochement between Türkiye and Syria. These demonstrations took place without any violent incidents worthy of note. In August 2022, two people who had burned a Turkish flag during these protests were reportedly arrested in SIG territory and handed over to Turkish

²⁶⁶ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 56; confidential source, 18 May 2023; STJ, *Syria: Ongoing Crackdown on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*, 7 April 2023; <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard> (downloaded 19 May 2023).

²⁶⁷ Confidential source, 18 May 2023.

²⁶⁸ BBC Monitoring (Syria TV), *Syria security forces 'open fire' on protesters in Deraa*, 21 January 2022; BBC Monitoring (Facebook), *Officer killed, another missing after armed attack in Syria's Deraa*, 28 December 2022.

²⁶⁹ A Syrian non-profit media organisation with its headquarters in Türkiye.

²⁷⁰ BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Fresh clashes reported in southern Syrian province of Deraa*, 14 December 2022; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 19 May 2023).

²⁷¹ <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard> (downloaded 19 May 2023); Al Jazeera, *Hundreds protest against Arab rapprochement with Syria's al-Assad*, 24 April 2023.

²⁷² USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 57-58; STJ, *Syria: Ongoing Crackdown on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*, 7 April 2023; <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 19 May 2023).

²⁷³ <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Violent protests hit Turkey-held Syria towns*, 4 June 2022.

security forces.²⁷⁴ A confidential source reported that people who had criticised Türkiye had indeed been arrested in SIG territory.²⁷⁵

5.3 Freedom of religion and belief

Although the Syrian Constitution lays down that the President must always be a Muslim, the country does not have a state religion. President Assad is an Alawite,²⁷⁶ and people of that denomination occupy the highest positions in the Syrian public administration and security apparatus. The Syrian government permits adherents of various beliefs and religions to practise their faith as long as their religious activities are not politically inspired and directed against the Syrian government. Muslims are not permitted to convert to other religions, however (see also §7.3). Jehovah's Witnesses are not permitted. Membership of the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist organisations is illegal and can be punished with imprisonment or even the death penalty.²⁷⁷

For risks to ethnic and/or religious groups in Syria see §7.2.

5.4 Honour disputes and blood feuds

5.4.1 *Honour killings and gender-based violence in the various control areas*

The Syrian conflict that had been ongoing since 2011 made the disadvantaged position of women and girls even worse. They fell victim to a wide range of violations and various kinds of gender-based violence (GBV), including 'honour killings', domestic violence by husbands or male relatives, sexual extortion and marrying off at a young age.²⁷⁸

Honour killings and other kinds of GBV were not recorded as such in Syria. Where men or women died in honour killings, this was not mentioned as the cause of death on the death certificate. Femicide was another label not used by the Syrian authorities to record killings of that kind. A study by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) et al. revealed 185 gender-based killings in the period from the beginning of 2019 to November 2022, and that figure probably merely represented the tip of the iceberg. Many women or their relatives would not report GBV and/or honour killings for fear of reprisals, to avoid stigmatisation, or to protect the male perpetrators.²⁷⁹

STJ was only able to collect statistics in AANES territory; the numbers of gender-based killings in other areas emerged mainly from interviews. Of the killings

²⁷⁴ France24, *Syria rebels protest against Turkey's 'reconciliation' proposal*, 12 August 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Arrests in northern Syria after anti-Turkey protests*, 14 August 2022; The Syrian Observer, *Erdogan and the Syrian Opposition: Failing the Syrian People Once Again*, 30 August 2022; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Report says Syrian opposition leader booed, expelled from Azaz protest*, 14 January 2023; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Protests in northern Syria after landmark Syrian-Turkish talks*, 30 December 2022.

²⁷⁵ Confidential source, 27 April 2023.

²⁷⁶ The Alawites are a religious community within Islam. Opinions are divided, but Alawism is nowadays generally regarded as an offshoot of Shiite Islam.

²⁷⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 17 May 2023); USDoS, *Syria 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2 June 2022, p. 1.

²⁷⁸ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 78; Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Syria: 185 Cases of "Honor Killing" since 2019*, 25 November 2022; confidential source, 2 May 2023.

²⁷⁹ STJ, *Syria: 185 Cases of "Honor Killing" since 2019*, 25 November 2022; confidential source, 2 May 2023; Confidential source, 3 May 2023; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 78-79.

counted, 129 had taken place in AANES territory, whereas 14, 21 and 21 cases had been counted in government, SSG and SIG territory, respectively. As the sources for the various areas were different, it was not possible to provide a picture of the ratios between the various areas of control as regards numbers of gender-based killings. It is not possible to interpret the degree of increase or decrease in GBV in Syria, given the lack of precise figures.²⁸⁰

5.4.2 *The scale of blood revenge in the various control areas*

Blood revenge occurred in Syria, especially in the areas with tribal societies.²⁸¹ Precise figures were not known, but a confidential source considered that blood revenge was more common than before, as the rule of law was no longer operating in Syria as a result of the conflict. The source indicated that people were more inclined to take the law into their own hands and were no longer being punished for it.²⁸²

5.4.3 *Ways of dealing with honour disputes*

Honour disputes usually took place within a family and were resolved within the family. Before resorting to honour killing, a husband would sometimes divorce his wife and cast her out. If she returned to her family, they might still kill her so as not to lose face.²⁸³ Some women who had been detained were cast out by their family, as they might have been the victim of rape during detention. Some of these women, according to the OHCHR, might then commit suicide because they had 'harmed the family's honour'.²⁸⁴

It is not possible to provide a clear picture of when honour killing was practised and when some other way of defending a family's honour was found within the family.

5.4.4 *Resolving blood feuds*

As the previous report noted, some tribes in Syria had recourse to mediation to prevent further escalation following some kind of violent interaction between two tribes.²⁸⁵ No other ways of preventing or resolving blood feuds were found during the research for the current report.

5.4.5 *Single women with resident young male relatives*

Sources agreed that a household headed by a single woman was more vulnerable than one headed by a man. A single woman with children living in a camp for displaced persons with no relatives or other social ties was vulnerable by definition. It is not possible to provide a clear picture of the vulnerability of households headed by a single woman. How vulnerable a household of this kind was would depend on the protection afforded by other people in the vicinity. A household headed by a single woman might be better protected, according to the sources, if it had male relatives (e.g. a brother or brother-in-law) living nearby. Under-age sons living with the family did not generally provide more protection. An adult son might well do so, but such cases were affected by compulsory military service: an adult son of military

²⁸⁰ STJ, *Syria: 185 Cases of "Honor Killing" since 2019*, 25 November 2022;

²⁸¹ Modern War Institute, *AN EYE FOR AN EYE: THE DYNAMICS OF BLOOD REVENGE IN CIVIL WAR*, 26 January 2023; Diana Darke, *The Turkey/Syria Earthquake strikes at the birthplace of civilization*, 1 March 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

²⁸² Confidential source, 2 May 2023.

²⁸³ STJ, *Syria: 185 Cases of "Honor Killing" since 2019*, 25 November 2022; confidential source, 2 May 2023.

²⁸⁴ OHCHR, *Türk calls on UN General Assembly to establish new, independent institution on missing persons in Syria*, 28 March 2023.

²⁸⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2021*, 14 June 2021, p. 62.

service age who did not have an exemption would be at risk himself, as the authorities could be looking for him, in which case he could not usually provide any protection.²⁸⁶

5.4.6 *Residence and enforcement options in Syria for people ostracised by their family and/or tribe*

As noted above, a household headed by a single woman was vulnerable without the protection of the family and/or tribe or clan. There were no adequate structural arrangements in Syria for taking in women who had been ostracised by their family and/or tribe. There were private organisations – often connected with the church – that took in single women, but this only occurred on a very small scale. Ostracised women could go to camps for displaced persons, but they were also vulnerable there (see §9.1). Another option for an ostracised woman was to marry a man as his second or third wife. Some women ended up in prostitution after being ostracised. In AANES territory, women could possibly join the YPJ – the women's armed force of the SDF – so as to escape from the family or tribe. No figures are available on the scale on which women are ostracised, hence it is impossible to provide a picture of the scale on which the above options occur.²⁸⁷

Nor are precise figures available on men ostracised by their family and/or tribe. Although men were generally less vulnerable than women, sources indicated that there were few ways for an ostracised man to support himself financially if he moved to another part of Syria. Camps for displaced persons were for families or women with children, according to a confidential source; single men were not usually taken in. An ostracised man could sign up with the SAA or some other armed group, but that was not always easy. He would still have to pass the selection procedure, and there would always be a background check before anyone was recruited. Strangers were not allowed to join the various armed groups without question.²⁸⁸ A confidential source reported that there were far more homeless men on the streets of the cities of Damascus and Aleppo than before, but was not able to say whether these men had been ostracised.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ Confidential source, 3 May 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

²⁸⁷ Diana Darke, *The Turkey/Syria Earthquake strikes at the birthplace of civilization*, 1 March 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023; <https://www.goodshepherdsisters.me/en/> (downloaded 23 May 2023).

²⁸⁸ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 13 April 2023; confidential source, 25 May 2023.

²⁸⁹ Confidential source, 25 May 2023.

6 Conscripts and reservists

6.1 Territory under the control of the Syrian authorities

This section describes the compulsory military service that officially applies in territory under the control of the Syrian authorities. As in the previous reporting period, the Military Service Law was not amended – as far as could be ascertained – during this reporting period.

Syrian men aged between 18 and 42, including those of military service age living abroad, are required to serve. The statutory duration of military service is 18–21 months, depending on the level of education.²⁹⁰ Once a man has completed his military service, he is automatically regarded by the Syrian government as a reservist and can be called up to serve in that capacity in the armed forces. In practice, many conscripts serve for longer than this period, due to the armed conflict.²⁹¹

Sources indicated that young men would sometimes serve eight to ten years in the army before being released from their military service. Reservists, including some already aged fifty or over,²⁹² were also apparently called up to serve again.²⁹³ Other sources indicated that it was uncommon for reservists to be called up during this reporting period because of the reduction in armed confrontations between the warring factions.²⁹⁴

6.1.1 Military service deferral and exemption mechanisms

Syrian law does not recognise the right of conscientious objection, nor does it provide for alternatives to military service.²⁹⁵ The Syrian system does however provide various ways of being exempted from military service or deferring it for a particular period, for instance if you are your parents' only son (even if you have sisters), if you are studying, or if you cannot do military service for medical reasons. Syrians living abroad can pay a buyout fee instead of performing military service. Men living in Syria can nowadays also buy themselves out officially.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁰ The rule was: the higher the level of education, the shorter the military service period: <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5571&cat=4431&>.

²⁹¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2021*, 14 June 2021, p. 42: the most recent legal changes in the conditions relating to military service as set out in the law date back to November 2020 and are laid down in Decree 31/2020.328. For information in addition to that contained in this section see §1.4 of the June 2021 General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria.

²⁹² According to the EUAA, men who had completed their compulsory military service could be called up as reservists until the age of 42. As far as could be ascertained, the Syrian legislation has not subsequently been amended: EUAA, *Country of Origin Information Report, Syria: Military Service*, April 2021, p. 13.

²⁹³ Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022; confidential source, 17 November 2022.

²⁹⁴ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

²⁹⁵ Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022.

²⁹⁶ Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

6.1.1.1 Buying out of military service

In Syria

Various fees are mentioned, but 8,000 dollars is stated by most sources as the amount that a man living in Syria needs to pay in order to be exempted from military service. Sources indicate that this is a standard fee, with no distinction as to belief, ethnicity or place of origin. Even Alawite businessmen loyal to the Assad administration need to pay this fee for their sons of military service age.²⁹⁷ Sources consider the risk of a person who has bought themselves out and has official proof still being called up as very low.²⁹⁸ In the case of men living in Syria, the military booklet that every man is issued at the age of eighteen is usually annotated to the effect that he has bought himself out.²⁹⁹ If a man has lost his military booklet, or his green booklet has been damaged and rendered unreadable, application can be made for a new one, but a fine then has to be paid.³⁰⁰

A confidential source mentioned one case of a man who had been arrested in Syria for buying himself out through an intermediary. The intermediary was found not to have been authorised and the man had no option other than to pay the buyout fee again. This was a case where the person in question was unable to present an official document.³⁰¹

In other countries

Syrian men living abroad can also buy themselves out of military service. The fee that they need to pay depends on how long they have been living abroad: those who have been living abroad for 1, 2, 3 or 4 years need to pay 10,000, 9,000, 8,000 or 7,000 dollars, respectively. Not only men who have left the country legally can buy themselves out: those who have done so illegally can also be exempted on payment of a fee. In order to be able to pay at a Syrian consulate or embassy you need to have proof that you are living abroad. Once the procedure has been completed, the name of the person who has bought themselves out may be posted on the website of the Syrian mission where the payment was made, according to a confidential source. There is a list of people who have bought themselves out on the website of the Syrian Embassy in Sweden, for example. What other Syrian missions have websites of this kind is not known.³⁰²

In addition to having their names posted on the internet, men who have a military booklet can have it annotated to the effect that they have paid. If they no longer have their booklet for some reason or another, they can obtain another physical document showing that they have paid, according to a confidential source.³⁰³ No specific information has been found regarding Syrian returnees who have bought themselves out, but various sources report that it is unlikely for a person who has bought themselves out abroad and returns to Syria still having to do military service. Having your name posted on the website of a Syrian mission abroad – e.g. the Syrian Embassy in Sweden – is an important factor here, according to a confidential source. Whether all Syrian embassies and consulates use websites of

²⁹⁷ Timep, *The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees*, 23 January 2023; Confidential source, 17 November 2022.

²⁹⁸ Confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

²⁹⁹ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³⁰⁰ Confidential source, 21 March 2023.

³⁰¹ Confidential source, 7 March 2023.

³⁰² Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 14 March 2023; Syrian Embassy in Sweden: (mofaex.gov.sy) (downloaded 15 March 2023).

³⁰³ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; The Guardian, *Syrian exiles forced to prop up regime with fees for avoiding conscription*, 28 September 2021.

this kind is not known. As soon as a Syrian living abroad who is of military service age has official proof that he has bought himself out, he can ask relatives in Syria to go to the local recruitment office to have him removed from the list of draft evaders.³⁰⁴

No cases are known of Syrians living abroad who returned to Syria after buying themselves out for a period of more than three months. As noted above, a confidential source considers it unlikely for men who have bought themselves out still to be recruited. There is a risk of encountering problems with the Syrian authorities if they are wanted for an offence other than draft evasion, according to that source.³⁰⁵

Buying out of reservist service

It is not possible to buy out of reservist service, according to a confidential source.³⁰⁶ As noted in §6.1, hardly any reservists were called up during this reporting period.

6.1.1.2 Studying

It used to be possible to defer military service by continuing to study.³⁰⁷ This is no longer the case. Laws have been passed in recent years that make it more difficult for students to continue to defer military service. An amendment to the Military Service Law was passed in 2019 setting an age limit after which students could not obtain deferral. The maximum age is affected by the type and duration of the course of study. A man of military service age has until the age of 21 to complete secondary school. If he wishes to continue studying after that, the age until which he will be able to continue studying will depend on the course. The maximum age for a person doing a six-year course is 29.³⁰⁸ It used to be possible for students of military service age to deliberately fail a year in order to continue studying for another year, but some courses have now placed a limit on resits, according to a confidential source.³⁰⁹

A student who has had his military service deferred will be able to travel abroad, according to a confidential source, but he will require official permission from the regional military headquarters. He must be able to present the document stating that he has permission at the border. How many times such permission can be obtained, and for what period, is not known.³¹⁰

6.1.1.3 Medical reasons

Men reaching the age of eighteen are invited to undergo a medical examination, the results of which are noted in the military booklet that every man in Syria is issued. Men can fail the medical examination completely on account of their medical condition, but it is often the case, according to a confidential source, that men with health problems are partially approved. They are then usually assigned to an administrative post following their six months of military training, which they must

³⁰⁴ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 21 March 2023; website of Syrian embassy in Sweden: (mofaex.gov.sy) (downloaded 16 June 2023)

³⁰⁵ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³⁰⁶ Confidential source, 8 March 2023..

³⁰⁷ The General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022 referred to men of military service age being able to study up to a maximum age of 37: Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 54.

³⁰⁸ Military Service Law in July 2019 by Legislative Decree No.12: <https://sana.sy/?p=979072> (downloaded 15 March 2023).

³⁰⁹ Confidential source, 3 February 2023.

³¹⁰ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

complete regardless of their physical condition.³¹¹ A September 2022 EUAA report stated that men with a medical exemption were sometimes still called up, and they would then generally be assigned tasks other than in the field.³¹² A confidential source notes that medical examinations can be subject to corruption, and doctors are sometimes bribed to fail men partially or completely.³¹³

6.1.1.4 Only sons

It was possible during this reporting period – as during the previous one – for a man to be exempted from military service if he was the only surviving son of his parents or single parent (divorcee, widow or widower) and the mother had reached the age – around fifty – at which she was unlikely to be able to have more children. A 2014 law laid down that, in the case of a family with two sons, one son did not need to sign up until the other had completed his military service. A family would be allowed to keep two boys at home if there were more than five brothers serving in the army, and three if there were more than nine.³¹⁴ Sources stated that this law was still in force and that the Syrian authorities usually observed it.³¹⁵

6.1.2 Regional differences

In areas officially under the control of the Syrian authorities but where local rulers are in charge, e.g. the provinces of Suweida and Daraa, it is possible for young men not to have to do military service. In Suweida, whose population is mainly Druze, the local religious leadership has adopted a more or less neutral stance in the conflict. Thanks to that stance they have been able to ensure that young men in the region are not recruited by the Syrian army. There are said to be some 30,000–50,000 *matlubin* (wanted persons) in Suweida who have still not served. Attempts by the Syrian authorities to recruit these men encountered resistance from the local population.³¹⁶ In the province of Daraa – in particular East Daraa, where Ahmed al-Ouda and his Eighth Brigade are responsible for security –, men can avoid military service, but they need to stay away from the army checkpoints in the area. The Eighth Brigade has sometimes been able to release conscripts taken by the Syrian army.³¹⁷

A confidential source stated that the Syrian authorities are currently actually targeting men from former opposition areas – where they are in control – to make them do their military service. The aim is to remove potential opposition fighters from these areas and make them serve elsewhere (see also §5.4.6).³¹⁸

6.1.3 The penalty for draft evasion

The penalty for draft evasion in peacetime was one to six months' imprisonment, following which the draft evader still had to perform their full military service. In wartime this offence could be punished with a maximum of five years' imprisonment. The practice in recent years, however, – precisely when this started

³¹¹ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³¹² EUAA, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals Country of Origin Information Report*, September 2022, p. 44.

³¹³ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022.

³¹⁴ SANA, *President al-Assad issues legislative decree amending mandatory military service law*, 6 August 2014.

³¹⁵ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 28 February 2023.

³¹⁶ SOHR, *Clashes in Al-Suwaydaa | Rijal Al-Karama Movement pursues groups of Military Security and controls its headquarters and burns regime headquarters*, 26 July 2022; confidential source, 3 February 2023.

³¹⁷ Asharq al-Awsat, *Compulsory Military Service Prompts Migration of Youths in Southern Syria*, 14 December 2022; confidential source, 21 March 2023.

³¹⁸ Confidential source, 27 April 2023.

is unclear – has been to send draft evaders direct to the army when they report or are caught.³¹⁹

Men who have evaded military service and then have to perform it once they are caught are treated more harshly, according to a confidential source, than conscripts who have obeyed the rules. The source was unable to say what that harsher treatment entailed.³²⁰ Another confidential source commented that a draft evader would remain in the hands of the military police until a new basic training course for conscripts began. According to this source, these courses were usually scheduled for April and September.³²¹

A draft evader from an area previously under opposition control, if caught, would be treated with more suspicion and would be more likely to be sent to the front lines or end up in prison, according to a confidential source.³²²

It was possible for the authorities to seize the property of a man and his family if he had not completed his military service before the age of 43.³²³ An inheritance could only be distributed once every son eligible for it had completed his military service or been exempted; as long as that was not the case, the inheritance would remain untouched.³²⁴

Draft evaders living abroad ran the risk of being arrested on return to Syria and conscripted to serve in the army. To avoid that risk they needed to have regularised their status at a Syrian diplomatic mission abroad. A draft evader living abroad could usually only regularise his status by paying a buyout fee (see §§1.3.2 and 6.1.1.1).

6.1.4 *Duties of conscripts and reservists*

Precisely what kind of tasks conscripts were required to undertake is not known, but sources indicate that they are also likely to be sent to areas where there is still fighting. Conscripts from reconciliation areas were apparently sent to the front disproportionately often, despite the fact that they had undergone hardly any combat training. This was supposed to be punishment for their previous disloyalty to the Assad administration.³²⁵ According to a confidential source, a conscript could arrange not to be sent to dangerous areas by having the right connections – *wasta* in Arabic – or paying bribes.³²⁶

6.1.5 *Amnesty schemes*

The Syrian authorities have in the past declared various amnesties for men who had contravened the military service legislation. On 21 December 2022, they declared an amnesty that gave draft evaders the opportunity to avoid a prison sentence if they reported for military service. The decree laid down that men living in Syria who

³¹⁹ Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022; Confidential source, 17 November 2022.

³²⁰ Confidential source, 3 February 2023.

³²¹ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³²² Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³²³ Timep, *The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees*, 23 January 2023; The Guardian, *Syrian exiles forced to prop up regime with fees for avoiding conscription*, 28 September 2021.

³²⁴ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³²⁵ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

³²⁶ Confidential source, 17 November 2022.

had evaded military service needed to report to the Syrian authorities within three months of the issue of the decree. Men living abroad had four months to do so.³²⁷

Men who had stayed away from checkpoints for years because they did not want to go into the army were now given the opportunity to report for duty. As the conflict had subsided and there was less risk of ending up in combat situations, it was thought that men who had evaded military service for years would be inclined to sign up.³²⁸ To what extent the Syrian authorities observed the latest amnesty is not known. A confidential source noted in this connection that they had not abided by the terms of some previous amnesties, and men who reported for duty had ended up in prison. The amnesty did not apply to men covered by the 2022 Cyber Crime Law,³²⁹ and it was subject to very broad interpretation, according to that source.³³⁰

A confidential source reported that men who had been members of pro-government militias could take advantage of amnesties of this kind. In many cases the time that they had served in such militias was not equivalent to military service. According to that source, an ex-militia member could therefore report for military service and would then only have to complete the six months' basic training, after which his military booklet would be annotated to the effect that he had done his military service. The time served in some pro-government militias did count as military service, in which case the men did not need to have recourse to amnesties of this kind: their military booklet would be annotated to the effect that they had completed their military service.³³¹

6.1.6

Demobilisation

The Syrian army started demobilising conscripted soldiers in May 2018, when it had recaptured Eastern Ghouta, the last rebel stronghold near Damascus.³³² The Syrian state broadcaster SANA reported in early August 2022 that the army was going to discharge some officers who had served as reservists or conscripts from their obligations. The decree stated that doctors, dentists and pharmacists who had served in the army as reservists or conscripts would be released from active service on 1 September 2022. The conscripts among them, however, would still have to complete their full period of military service. The decree made an exception for e.g. anaesthetists and trauma doctors, who could only be discharged if their medical unit no longer required their services.³³³

President Assad issued another administrative decree at the end of August 2022 laying down that reservists with the rank of officer no longer needed to serve in the army. Reservists with the rank of officer and students would also no longer be called

³²⁷ BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *Syria issues general amnesty for draft dodgers*, 21 December 2022; BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Syria discharges new batch of officers from reserve duty*, active service, 27 August 2022.

³²⁸ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³²⁹ The most severe penalties under the law relate to posting online messages that are regarded as undermining the prestige of the state, threatening national unity or inciting negative public opinion. For example, people who criticised the Syrian authorities have been convicted of 'undermining the morale of the nation'. Sources indicated that the new Cyber Crime Law was intended to send a message to the population that criticism of the Assad administration would not be tolerated: Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, pp. 67-68.

³³⁰ Confidential source, 31 January 2023.

³³¹ Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³³² BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *Syria discharges some doctors from reserve duty*, active military service, 10 August 2022.

³³³ BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *Syria discharges some doctors from reserve duty*, active military service, 10 August 2022.

up as reservists. Under the decree, officers and students who had done their military service could also leave the army. NCOs and reservists who had served in the army for at least six-and-a-half years on 31 August 2022 would be discharged on 1 October 2022.³³⁴ Sources noted that it was uncommon for reservists still to be called up, as the armed struggle had subsided.³³⁵

Reservists and conscript soldiers in the Syrian army have had recourse to paying bribes to their officers in order not to have to serve in their military units for particular periods. This phenomenon is referred to as *al-tafyeesh* or *al-taffiesh*. There was no fixed amount: the amounts payable depended on the unit concerned and the officer who had to be paid.³³⁶

Whether demobilised troops were called up again during this reporting period is not known.

6.1.7 *Central database/lists*

Whether lists of draft evaders are kept in a central database is unclear. Some sources confirmed that lists of wanted draft evaders existed but considered that they were not kept in a central database. The various intelligence and security services had their own lists. The Syrian authorities had made attempts to centralise the lists, but these had not been successful.³³⁷ Other sources stated that there was a central database but it was not accessible to everyone everywhere.³³⁸

6.1.8 *Passports for reservists and men of military service age*

Men of military service age who have obtained deferral and reservists (up to the age of 38) – reservists with special jobs, such as doctors and highly qualified mechanics (up to the age of 40) – need permission from their local army unit to apply for a passport. For travel abroad, once having obtained permission they are given a document that they have to show at the border.³³⁹

A reservist living abroad who is wanted for reservist service can also apply for a passport. This is also the case with draft evaders and even deserters, according to a confidential source. The Syrian authorities regard this as an additional source of income from people, most of whom do not intend to return to Syria. It is also possible for a family member to apply for a passport for a man living abroad who has evaded military service or been called up as a reservist. Whether a statement of permission from the army is required is not known.³⁴⁰

³³⁴ BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Syria discharges new batch of officers from reserve duty, active service*, 27 August 2022.

³³⁵ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

³³⁶ Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022; Enab Baladi, *Army soldiers pay to evade service; Officers demand skyrocket "tariff"*, 7 February 2023.

³³⁷ Confidential source, 31 January 2023; confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

³³⁸ Confidential source, 22 March 2023; DIS, *Syria Military service: recruitment procedure, conscripts' duties and military service for naturalised Ajanibs*, July 2023, p. 9.

³³⁹ Confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 14 March 2023.

³⁴⁰ Confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

6.1.9 *Surrender of identity documents when entering the army*

Conscripts and reservists are issued a military identity document when they enter the army and need to hand in their civil identity document. If the person in question has a passport, he does not need to hand it in.³⁴¹

6.1.10 *Reservist duties of police officers*

A confidential source stated that there is no reservist service for police officers who have completed their military service, whether in the police or otherwise. Former police officers may be called up to serve in the army, but this only takes place in the event of a general mobilisation, which did not occur during this reporting period.³⁴²

6.2 **AANES**

6.2.1 *Developments in relation to military service and voluntary service*

In AANES territory there are the HXP (Self-Defence Duty Forces, *Hêzên Xweparastinê* in Kurdish) in addition to the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces). The SDF are a coalition including Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian militias that are involved in military operations (see also §3.5.4). The HXP are regarded as SDF auxiliary forces.³⁴³ Since 2021 in AANES territory, men aged between 18 and 24 have been required to serve with the HXP for a year.³⁴⁴ The period of military service can be extended if the situation requires. Men can also be called up as reservists, although this has not happened yet, according to Danish Immigration Service (DIS) sources. Women can sign up with the HXP on a voluntary basis. Like the SDF, the HXP have units made up entirely of women and led by women.³⁴⁵ Men who volunteer for the SDF do not need to perform military service with the HXP.³⁴⁶

BBC Monitoring cited Syrian media at the beginning of 2023 which had reported the fact that the SDF had imposed a military service requirement on men in the area under their control. Draft evaders would be punished. The SDF had apparently made this decision because of the continuing air strikes that the Turkish army was carrying out on SDF positions and the ongoing threat of a Turkish offensive against the SDF.³⁴⁷ What relationship there was between any SDF military service requirement and the requirement to serve with the HXP is not known. Nor has any other information on the subject been found, apart from that from BBC Monitoring.

6.2.2 *The difference between what the law says and the situation in practice*

As noted above, the SDF does not have a statutory military service requirement, as far as could be ascertained. Although there were sources that reported enforced

³⁴¹ Confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

³⁴² Confidential source, 14 March 2023.

³⁴³ The HXP are security forces managed by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). Although the HXP are regarded as SDF auxiliary forces, they have their own commanders. The SDF assign duties to the HXP and decide where to deploy them. Members of the HXP are not generally deployed in active combat operations; instead they tend to be used to guard checkpoints and AANES buildings or to carry out other security duties in the cities.

³⁴⁴ The age range in 2021 was 18-40. This could differ from one AANES-controlled administrative area to another:

³⁴⁵ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, pp. 1, 16, 49 and 43; confidential source, 30 April 2023 and 13 July 2023.

³⁴⁶ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 1; RIC, *Translation: Law concerning military service in North and East Syria*, 10 June 2020.

³⁴⁷ BBC Monitoring, *Syria Kurdish forces enact draft amid Turkey strikes*, 13 January 2023.

recruitment of men by the SDF, others contradicted this, considering that SDF recruitment was entirely voluntary.³⁴⁸

Under the law, members of the HXP are not deployed for combat purposes; they are intended to provide support with logistics and other non-combat duties to non-conscripted forces such as the YPG (see footnote 343).³⁴⁹ According to the DIS, HXP conscripts had sometimes been sent to the front line in situations of force majeure. There were also situations in which conscripts volunteered to fight on the front line.³⁵⁰

6.2.3 *Deferral and exemptions*

The law lays down that there are ways of obtaining deferral and/or exemption from military service with the HXP. Once a son in a family has died in battle, all the other sons are exempt from military service. An only son in the family is also granted exemption once his mother reaches the age of fifty and is unlikely to have any more children. Men of military service age can also be exempted for medical reasons.³⁵¹

Students on university and pre-university courses can have their military service deferred. The maximum age of deferral will depend on the type of course being taken: a secondary school pupil, for instance, can obtain deferral until the age of 21. The DIS cites a source which claims that the military service requirement ceases automatically under the law once a student has obtained deferral until after the age of 24.³⁵²

Another DIS source considers that the AANES authorities generally abide by the terms regarding deferral for students.³⁵³ A man in AANES territory who was studying in the north of Iraq said that, despite having reached the age of 26, he would not take the risk of returning to his native land for fear of still being recruited.³⁵⁴ No cases of recruitment once exemption from or deferral of military service had been obtained were found during the research for the current report, however.

As far as could be ascertained, it is not possible to buy out of military service officially. Men living abroad can obtain deferral for a year on payment of 400 dollars. Men who have a residence permit in Türkiye or Iraq – or are otherwise legally resident in those countries – are exempted from that payment, according to a confidential source. How payment can be made has not been ascertained.³⁵⁵

6.2.4 *Compulsory military service for returnees from abroad*

A man who leaves AANES territory while being required to serve with the HXP and returns without having paid for deferral would still have to serve, regardless of age. If a man had left the area before the age of 18 and was therefore not required to

³⁴⁸ Confidential source, 30 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Syria agency says SDF forces injured civilians in Deir al-Zour raid*, 6 August 2022; DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, pp. 1 and 64.

³⁴⁹ RIC, *Translation: Law concerning military service in North and East Syria*, 10 June 2020.

³⁵⁰ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 1.

³⁵¹ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 12; Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022.

³⁵² DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 12.

³⁵³ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 12.

³⁵⁴ Institute of Current World Affairs, *Syria's young draft-dodgers migrate to Iraq*, 24 May 2022.

³⁵⁵ RIC, *Translation: Law concerning military service in North and East Syria*, 10 June 2020; confidential source, 4 June 2023.

serve with the HXP, he would no longer have to serve if he returned at or after the age of 25.³⁵⁶

According to the DIS, men who have evaded military service are punished with an additional month's service. The Danish Immigration Service did not provide a clear answer in its report to the question of the extent to which these rules were enforced in practice. Nor was it clear to what extent other punishments were imposed on draft evaders.³⁵⁷

According to DIS sources, Arabs and other minorities in the HXP were not subjected to different treatment from that of Kurds in the self-defence service. This was corroborated by a confidential source.³⁵⁸

6.3 Forced recruitment in other areas

HTS and the Turkish-backed armed faction of the SNA do not carry out forced recruitment, according to various sources. Many young men are reportedly induced to join the local armed factions because of the socio-economic situation in those areas and aversion to the Syrian authorities.³⁵⁹

6.4 Recruitment of minors

In 2021,³⁶⁰ the UN recorded 1,296 verified cases of recruitment and deployment of minors by various armed groups in Syria, representing a relative rise in relation to the UN's previous reporting period.³⁶¹ The various SNA factions combined accounted for 569 cases, followed by HTS and the SDF with 380 and 221 minors respectively who had been recruited or deployed for various purposes. The SAA, pro-government troops and militias combined had recruited or deployed 91 minors in 2021. Most of the minors (1,285 of the 1,296) had been deployed in the armed struggle.³⁶²

The SDF was thought to have recruited far fewer minors since reaching agreement on the subject with the UN in 2019. The UN stated, however, that an increase in the number of verified cases of minors recruited by the SDF had again been seen in 2022. The SNA stated in September 2021 that it would take measures to protect children, among others, against recruitment. What measures these were, and to what extent the SNA implemented them, is not known.³⁶³

³⁵⁶ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 13.

³⁵⁷ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, pp. 15 and 19.

³⁵⁸ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 17; confidential source, 30 April 2023.

³⁵⁹ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria jihadist group HTS showcases 2022 'military achievements'*, 7 January 2023.

³⁶⁰ As far as could be ascertained, these are the most recent data issued by the UN.

³⁶¹ The UN counted 1,423 verified cases of recruitment and deployment of minors in the period from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2020. This figure is less on average than the cases of recruitment counted in 2021.

³⁶² UN Security Council, *Children and armed conflict - Report of the Secretary-General A/76/871-S/2022/493*, 23 June 2022, p. 23; UN Security Council, *Children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic - Report of the Secretary-General S/2021/398*, 23 April 2021, pp. 3-4.

³⁶³ Confidential source, 17 November 2022; DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 64; Kurdistan24, *Child recruitment by SDF down significantly since 2019, UN says*, 22 May 2021; UN, *Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict - A/HRC/52/60*, 9 February 2023, p. 6.

Minors joined the various armed factions mainly for socio-economic reasons.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ DIS, *Syria Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate*, June 2022, p. 64; Kurdistan24, *Child recruitment by SDF down significantly since 2019, UN says*, 22 May 2021; confidential source, 3 February 2023.

7 Specific groups

7.1 Unaccompanied minors

The Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022 considered the situation of unaccompanied minors in detail.³⁶⁵ There were no developments in government territory regarding new legislation on the welfare of unaccompanied minors during this reporting period.³⁶⁶ Several laws on the *kafala* system had been passed in SSG territory, according to a confidential source.³⁶⁷ The law now required an extensive search for close relatives to be carried out before placing an unaccompanied child with a non-related family.³⁶⁸

The general deterioration in the humanitarian situation also affected the situation of unaccompanied minors. As the 2022 information report stated, although statistics were absent, there were not enough care facilities for unaccompanied minors due to the conflict and the ongoing economic crisis. Some families were in such dire straits that they abandoned their children on the street or outside Ministry of Social Affairs buildings because they could no longer take care of them.³⁶⁹ The SOHR reported that there had been an alarming increase in the number of abandoned children in Syria in 2022. It reported on 21 December 2022 that 37 children abandoned by their families had so far been found in government territory and AANES territory.³⁷⁰ How many children were involved in 2021 is not known.

Because of the years of conflict, resulting in a humanitarian and economic crisis, children have sometimes lacked any kind of care or shelter, despite Syrian societal structures, as noted in the previous report.³⁷¹ When asked, sources indicated that the situation for unaccompanied minors had even deteriorated in the past year, but they were unable to provide specific figures or an impression of the conditions in children's homes in the various areas of control. Following the February 2023 earthquakes, many families lost their homes – in many cases not for the first time. More than two hundred children in the north-west of Syria lost their family or were separated from it. A place with close relatives was found for most of them. Others were placed in children's homes – mainly private institutions –, according to confidential sources.³⁷²

Sources reported an increase in the numbers of children begging on the streets during the daytime. To what extent these children were unaccompanied or had a parent or carer nearby was not known.³⁷³

³⁶⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, §§3.6.1 and 3.6.1.1.

³⁶⁶ Confidential source, 25 May 2023.

³⁶⁷ Kafala is a kind of sponsorship in which a non-related family looks after a child if the biological parents are unable to do so. The child cannot claim the family name or an inheritance from the family providing childcare. Adoption is prohibited in Islam.

³⁶⁸ Confidential source, 3 April 2023.

³⁶⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 65.

³⁷⁰ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Syria war monitor reports increase in 'abandoned children'*, 22 December 2022.

³⁷¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, §§3.6.1 and 3.6.1.1.

³⁷² Confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 25 May 2023.

³⁷³ Confidential source, 25 May 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023.

7.2 Risks to ethnic and/or religious groups

7.2.1 *In government territory*

Sunnis make up the largest section of the population in government territory.³⁷⁴ Apart from Muslim Brothers and Salafis, Sunnis were generally allowed to practise their religion without problems, according to USDoS. Many opponents of the Assad administration are Sunnis, however, which is why most of the people who suffered human rights violations by the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies were of that denomination. Because of their major presence among (armed) opposition groups, Sunnis more often faced discrimination in government territory than other religious groups. Sunnis who had close links with the Syrian government were less likely to face discrimination, according to Freedom House.³⁷⁵ Any man of military service age could be called up, but sources indicated that the authorities particularly targeted young men from former opposition areas, where there was often a Sunni majority, for military service. According to a confidential source, Sunni men from former opposition areas also received worse treatment in the army – treatment was bad for everyone during the conflict in any case – than other recruits: they were more likely to be sent to conflict areas, for instance, and had to pay more bribes to officers for favours such as days off than conscripts of other denominations (see §§6.1.2 and 6.1.4).³⁷⁶

7.2.2 *In SIG territory*

Members of religious and/or ethnic minorities – in particular Kurds, Yazidis and Christians – in areas under Turkish control, were said to be victims of human rights violations and marginalisation.³⁷⁷ These minorities, in particular the Kurds, had reportedly been driven out of their original areas. Türkiye was said to be building housing blocks for the families of SNA members, with support from Kuwait and Qatar, among others. The demography in the Afrin district, which came under Turkish control during Operation Olive Branch in 2018 (see footnote 33), had apparently changed radically in recent years due to the large influx of Sunni Arabs displaced from government territory.³⁷⁸

Prior to the Turkish operations in the north-west of Syria, the Afrin district was about 95% Kurdish. The percentage during this reporting period was a good deal lower, with estimates ranging from 25% to 35%.³⁷⁹ The Kurds who had been driven out moved mainly to AANES territory, in particular the Tel Rifaat enclave (see

³⁷⁴ USDoS, *Syria 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2 June 2022, p. 3: The US administration estimates that 74% of the entire Syrian population are Sunnis, namely Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens and Turkmens. Other Muslims are Alawites, Ismailis and Twelver Shiites, which together account for about thirteen per cent of the population. The Druze make up three per cent. The US administration estimates the percentage of Christians at 10%, but some reports give a much lower estimate of around 2.5%. The percentage of Sunnis in Syria is said to have decreased dramatically since the conflict: the EUAA states that it was about 65% before the conflict and had fallen to between 49% and 52% by 2020. The percentage of Alawites, on the other hand, had increased.

³⁷⁵ USDoS, *Syria 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2 June 2022, p. 1; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023 Syria*, F. Rule of Law, 2023; Atalayar, *Turkey and Syria: rapprochement in the face of Iran's lengthening shadow*, 10 January 2023; MEI, *The spider of Khanasir and the rising star of Syria's Hussam Luka*, 8 December 2022.

³⁷⁶ Confidential source, 27 April 2023; confidential source, 11 July 2023; The New York Review, *Between Regime and Rebels: A Survey of Syria's Alawi Sect*, 22 July 2019.

³⁷⁷ USDoS, *Syria 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2 June 2022, p. 13.

³⁷⁸ BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *Qatari Red Crescent opens housing block for 'Turkish loyalists' in north Syria*, 18 January 2023; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 6 April 2023.

³⁷⁹ 110,000 Kurds – about eighty per cent of the Kurdish population in Afrin – were said to have been forced to leave the area.

§3.5.4). The Kurds who remained in the district or had returned found their homes had been plundered or confiscated. The minorities in the areas that had come under Turkish control during the Euphrates Shield and Peace Spring operations reportedly also faced marginalisation, discrimination and deportation. Sources were unable to provide any precise figures but reported that this was taking place on a smaller scale than in Afrin. These areas had traditionally been more mixed and did not have a Kurdish majority, which, according to one source, could be the reason for the slightly better situation there than in the Afrin district.³⁸⁰ The SIG area was one of the areas hardest hit by the February 2023 earthquakes. The SDC accused the Turkish authorities of discriminating against the Kurdish population when distributing relief supplies.³⁸¹

The Kurdish population and other minorities in SIG territory were said to have been the victims of extortion, abuse, rape and even killing by various SNA factions. Members of the SNA faction Ahrar al-Sharqiya in Afrin apparently shot four Kurds celebrating Newroz (the Kurdish New Year)³⁸² dead in March 2023.³⁸³

7.2.3

In SSG territory

The HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani has recently tried to show that HTS accepts and respects other faiths in SSG territory, visiting both Christian and Druze villages in the area during the reporting period.³⁸⁴ Sources indicated that legislation and regulations had been relaxed somewhat across the board in SSG territory. The *mahram* system, which requires a woman to be accompanied by a male relative in public, had apparently been abolished. Smoking in public – which had still been prohibited a few years earlier – had also been permitted again, according to a confidential source. Sources agreed that the situation for minorities in SSG territory had improved recently, but they still faced discrimination and deprivation. Christians, for example, were allowed to practise their religion, and some churches had reopened. Churches were not permitted to display Christian symbols such as a cross outside, however. All women in the area – regardless of denomination – had to wear a headscarf. Christians had also not yet had their confiscated homes and property restored to them.³⁸⁵

In addition to HTS, other Islamic and jihadist organisations that condemned Al-Jolani's rapprochement with the Druze were active in the area. Members of a jihadist group reportedly attacked Druze villages in the north of Idlib in August

³⁸⁰ Confidential source, 6 April 2023; confidential source, 4 May 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Kurds continue to accuse Turkey of forced demographic change*, 28 February 2023; North Press Agency, *Turkish occupation devastates Afrin's education system – Watchdog*, 17 March 2023.

³⁸¹ BBC Monitoring, *Kurds continue to accuse Turkey of forced demographic change*, 28 February 2023.

³⁸² The name derives from Persian *Noo-rooz*, which literally means 'new day'. This public holiday is celebrated every year around 21 March. The Kurdish New Year has traditionally been a spring celebration. Newroz is sometimes spelled e.g. 'Nowruz' or 'Newruz'.

³⁸³ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 28, 88-89; North Press Agency, *Watchdog documents torture in prisons of Turkey's SNA in Syria's Afrin*, 1 February 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Syria: Kurdish weekly media highlights 20-26 March*, 28 March 2023; confidential source, 6 April 2023.

³⁸⁴ Only a few hundred Christians live in SSG territory, whereas the whole area has a population of some five million.

³⁸⁵ Confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria militant group HTS responds to Idlib church controversy*, 4 September 2022; Equal Times, *Syrian refugees returning home face poverty and danger*, 3 October 2022.

2022, killing a Druze husband and wife. The jihadist group denied any involvement in the attack.³⁸⁶

7.2.4 *In AANES territory*

Kurds make up a substantial proportion of the population of the AANES area, but they are not in the majority: certain areas such as Manbij, Deir ez-Zour and Raqqa have an Arab majority, for instance. Members of various Christian denominations, Yazidis, Turkmen and Chechens³⁸⁷ also live there. Although the other denominations are underrepresented in the administration of the AANES area and the Kurds are in charge there, there were no reports of systematic persecution or discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity or belief.³⁸⁸

The AANES authorities had taken measures to end the official discrimination of various minorities in north-east Syria, when it was still under the administration of the Syrian authorities. To what extent these measures were actually effective and improved the position of the minorities living in AANES territory is not known.³⁸⁹

ISIS and jihadist groups

Where ISIS and/or other jihadist groups were active, minorities such as Christians, Druze, Alawites and Yazidis ran the risk of being the target of attacks. The ISIS news medium al-Naba stated in January 2023 that the terrorist group had been responsible for killing two Shiites and a Druze in Daraa in 2022. This information has not been corroborated by other sources. Nor are any precise figures available on the number of attacks by groups such as ISIS on members of other faiths.³⁹⁰

7.3 **Islamic apostates**

There is no law in Syria that makes leaving Islam a criminal offence. Article 33 of the 2012 Syrian Constitution lays down that all Syrian citizens have equal rights and duties, and that they must not be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, origin, language, religion or belief.³⁹¹ There are no strict religious rules in force in government territory, where there are many people who are still Muslim in name but do not actually attend the mosque or observe other religious duties or rites. Despite this, people will never openly admit that they have left Islam, according to a confidential source, as that is still not accepted in Syrian society.³⁹²

Although ISIS does not actually control any territory in Syria, it is still active in certain areas (see §1.2). The ISIS ideology is based partly on designating people of

³⁸⁶ BBC Monitoring (Telegram), *Syria militant group HTS responds to Idlib church controversy*, 4 September 2022; BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Jihadist group in Syria 'denies involvement' in attack on Druze villages*, 22 August 2022.

³⁸⁷ This is a small group of Chechens who have long been living in Syria, not the Chechen fighters who had often joined jihadist and Islamic groups during the conflict: Zaman al Wasl, *Chechens of Syria: A Dwindling Minority*, July 2017.

³⁸⁸ BBC Monitoring, *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)*, 25 July 2022; Enab Baladi, *Arabs look for missing representation in SDF-controlled areas*, 12 April 2022.

³⁸⁹ Syria Direct, *Yazidis' long struggle against landlessness and discrimination in rural Hasakah*, 4 April 2023.

³⁹⁰ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 82; STJ, *Idlib's Druze Complain of Persecution*, 24 November 2023; BBC Monitoring (Orient News TV), *Syrian rebel figure denies church strike, blames government*, 25 July 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: IS belatedly reveals attacks in Syria's south*, 19 January 2023.

³⁹¹ Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012, Article 3.

³⁹² Confidential source, 7 March 2023.

other faiths as *kafirs* ('infidels'), and ISIS adherents believe that apostasy should be punished by death.³⁹³ The United States Department of State (USDoS) stated that, according to human rights organisations, ISIS often targets civilians, people suspected of collaborating with security forces, and groups that it regards as apostates.³⁹⁴ There are no figures available on people killed by ISIS for leaving Islam.

No cases of apostates who encountered difficulties with HTS during the reporting period are known. Although the history of HTS is rooted in the Al Qaida ideology, in recent years the organisation's leadership has been trying to show a more moderate face, and it has openly distanced itself from the jihadist ideology.³⁹⁵ Despite this, the ideas and world view of the HTS leadership and members remain extreme, according to university researcher Aaron Zelin in his study of HTS.³⁹⁶ The group will therefore not tolerate apostasy from Islam, and this can have adverse effects, as has indeed been seen in the past.³⁹⁷

7.4 LGBTIQ+

Information on the various aspects of being LGBTIQ+³⁹⁸ is not available in detail. Sources do not always differentiate between the various subcategories, hence these could not all be discussed.

For a detailed description of the situation and legal circumstances of the LGBTIQ+ community see §3.4.8 of the June 2021 General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria and §3.1.3 of the May 2022 General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria. There have been no changes in the practical and legal position of people belonging to this community since then.

7.4.1 *The general social situation of the LGBTIQ+ community*

The legal framework within which members of the LGBTIQ+ community can be prosecuted did not change during the reporting period. LGBTIQ+ people can still be prosecuted under Article 517 or 520 of the Penal Code if they have committed acts regarded as 'violations of public decency' or as 'unnatural'. Those found guilty under those articles can be sentenced to up to three years' imprisonment.³⁹⁹

To what extent the Syrian authorities actively prosecuted such offences is not known. A confidential source reported that the Syrian security apparatus created

³⁹³ ICG, *Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West*, 7 March 2023, pp. 2 and 17; Stanford University, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state#_ftn8 (downloaded 31 March 2023).

³⁹⁴ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT*, 2 June 2022, p. 2: this does not discuss what groups ISIS regards as apostates.

³⁹⁵ Al Monitor, *Syrian extremist group in Idlib breaks with jihadist ideologue*, 20 October 2020; Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, 9 May 2022, p. 19.

³⁹⁶ Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, 9 May 2022, p. 26.

³⁹⁷ USDoS, *Syria 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2 June 2022, p. 14; North Press Agency, *"Tahrir al-Sham" arrests a 50 year-old man for apostasy*, 23 September 2019; ICG, *Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West*, 7 March 2023, p. 12; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023.

³⁹⁸ Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, intersex and queers. The 2022 information report referred to the 'LGBTI' community rather than to 'LGBTQ+'.

³⁹⁹ COAR, *LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector*, June 2021, pp. 12-13; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 86.

fake accounts on e.g. Grindr⁴⁰⁰ so as to identify members of the LGBTIQ+ community and prosecute them. Specific cases of this kind were not known during the reporting period, however. Information on actual prosecutions of members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Syria is scarce.⁴⁰¹

No-one in Syria would openly disclose their sexual orientation, according to confidential sources. Syrian society still regards the sexual orientation of LGBTIQ+ people as a problem. Trans people cannot live in accordance with their gender identity, as it is not accepted in Syrian society – although there is no specific law that prohibits transgenderism.⁴⁰² Even if an individual is able to avoid imprisonment through connections or by paying bribes, members of the LGBTIQ+ community are most likely to face social exclusion, exile or abuse if they openly identify as such.⁴⁰³

7.4.2 *Potential risks to members of the LGBTIQ+ community*

What risks an individual could face will depend on various factors, such as the social environment, the local rulers, and the LGBTIQ+ person's financial position.

Areas of control

Organisations such as HTS and ISIS are likely to take harsher action against members or alleged members of the community. Where HTS exercises authority, an individual who identifies as LGBTIQ+ can receive the death penalty. The families of the people killed in these cases will often accept death as an honour killing or crime so as to maintain their status and reputation in their community. Although ISIS no longer controls any territory in Syria, it still has a presence in various parts of the country. The ISIS doctrine requires the death penalty for homosexuality. The terrorist group is known to have stoned homosexuals to death or pushed them off high blocks of flats.⁴⁰⁴

The social environment

As the previous information report stated, unlike elite LGBTIQ+ people, who enjoy a certain amount of freedom, middle-class LGBTIQ+ people are said to be vulnerable because their sexual orientation can be used against them by state actors, people they know, or other actors with opportunistic motives.⁴⁰⁵ A confidential source confirmed that higher-class people enjoyed a certain amount of freedom within the home, whereas LGBTIQ+ people in poorer rural communities needed to conform to the conservative values of those communities. The source commented that there are many conservative families in the elite as well, and those families have the money and means to prosecute or exclude a family member who belongs to the LGBTIQ+ community.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁰ A dating app for the LGBTIQ+ community.

⁴⁰¹ Confidential source, 2 May 2023.

⁴⁰² Confidential source, 2 May 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023.

⁴⁰³ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 87; Atlantic Council, *This organization is helping Syria's LGBTQI community. Here's how*, 21 June 2022; confidential source, 2 May 2023.

⁴⁰⁴ ICG, *Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West*, 7 March 2023, p. 7; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 86; CNN:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr7d1sTDNts>, 5 March 2015; HRW, *"Everyone Wants Me Dead" Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People by Armed Groups in Iraq*, 23 March 2022.

⁴⁰⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 58.

⁴⁰⁶ Confidential source, 2 May 2023.

Financial situation and connections

Sources indicated that a good deal could be arranged using bribes and the right connections. An individual who encounters problems because of their sexual orientation can ensure that they are not imprisoned or punished in some other way by using the right connections or bribing the people who are causing them the problems. It is difficult to provide a clear picture of the amounts involved and the connections needed, according to a confidential source.⁴⁰⁷

7.4.3

Protection options

As the previous information report stated, it was not possible for an LGBTIQ+ individual to seek protection from the authorities. This was the case not only with violence that had been committed by the authorities themselves but also with violence or expected violence from the community.⁴⁰⁸ This picture did not change during this reporting period.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ Confidential source, 2 May 2023.

⁴⁰⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 59.

⁴⁰⁹ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 87; confidential source, 2 May 2023.

8 The rule of law and legal protection

8.1 The operation of the justice system in the various areas of control

8.1.1 *The judicial process in government territory*

As the previous information report mentioned, sources had stated that there was no independent judiciary in Syria. The Syrian authorities hold the judiciary and fair judicial process in contempt, according to the UNCOI.⁴¹⁰ In this reporting period too, it could be said that the rule of law was not functioning properly in Syria, and that justice and the judicial process were under severe pressure in government territory. The Syrian courts e.g. based their judgments on confessions obtained under duress – including torture. Also, the Syrian authorities could impose the death penalty on an individual for their political or ideological beliefs by charging them with terrorism. The charges in such cases were often vague and unsupported by evidence.⁴¹¹

Sources reported that there were no longer any independent judges in government territory: judges were appointed to represent the interests of the state. There was no question of a centrally administered rule of law. First, there were the various areas of control, but even within those areas various factions had control over the judicial process in particular parts. The justice system had operated on a purely local basis since the conflict, whereas prior to the conflict the Syrian authorities had been fully in control.⁴¹²

It was therefore difficult, according to these sources, to provide a clear picture of the justice system in government territory. Sources did agree on one point: the larger the bribe paid and the better the (local) connections were, the greater the likelihood that a person could receive justice.⁴¹³

8.1.2 *The judicial process in SSG territory*

During the previous reporting period, sources reported that violence and lawlessness were widespread in the area under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).⁴¹⁴ During this reporting period, many civilians in that area criticised the judicial process for the absence of transparency, the absence of evidence to substantiate charges and arrests, and the fact that people were tried in unlawful courts. The secret prisons where people were held without any prior process still existed during this reporting period, according to the North Press Agency (NPA).⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁰ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 72.

⁴¹¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/syria/freedom-world/2023> (downloaded 17 May 2023); USDoS, *Syria 2021 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2 June 2022, p. 1; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 16; Timep, *Understanding Assad's New Cyber-Crackdown in Syria*, 5 October 2022; confidential source, 29 March 2023.

⁴¹² Confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 29 March 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁴¹³ Confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023; confidential source, 29 March 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁴¹⁴ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 73.

⁴¹⁵ Combating Terrorism Center, *Jihadi 'Counterterrorism': Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State*, FEBRUARY 2023, VOLUME 16, ISSUE 2; SNHR, *The Most Notable Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Violations Since the Establishment of Jabhat al Nusra to Date*, 31 January 2023, p. 8; North Press Agency, *HTS executes 19 people in Syria's Idlib since early 2023*, 20 April 2023: The Kurdish news medium North Press Agency stated that executions were even carried out at those centres.

8.1.3 *The judicial process in SIG territory*

As the previous information report stated, the judiciary, which reportedly comprised experienced people, was under the direct and indirect influence of the Turkish armed forces there and their local Syrian allies.⁴¹⁶ The SNA comprises various factions that each exert control over a particular area, where they also control the civil structure. They are often also responsible for the justice system in those areas. There was said to be a high degree of impunity there, as the local rulers also made up the judiciary. Reportedly, the Turkish authorities did not take any action against this situation.⁴¹⁷

8.1.4 *The judicial process in AANES territory*

The judicial process in the area controlled by the AANES was described in the previous information report as complex, with overlapping functions and jurisdictions.⁴¹⁸ According to Syria Direct, there were two legal systems in AANES territory: the system set up in 2013 by the AANES, with its own laws, procedures and courts, and the Syrian government system that already existed in the area prior to 2011. The Syrian government is said to have had an administrative presence in the area throughout the war, with its own courts, for example. The coexistence of the two systems apparently resulted in contradictory judgments by different courts in certain cases. How the two legal systems related to each other is not known.⁴¹⁹ The AANES administration has implemented its own legal code in the areas under its influence. In its report on the human rights situation in 2022, USDoS stated that in spite of this code there were no criteria for a fair process, such as a ban on arbitrary detention, the right of judicial review and the right to a lawyer.⁴²⁰

8.2 **Reporting a violation or crime**

The General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022 stated that bribery was a factor in obtaining police cooperation when reporting a violation or crime. If a person paid or had an influential position, the report would be considered and investigated vigorously, according to the report.⁴²¹

In this reporting period too, bribery and/or a person's position were factors in whether the police would cooperate. A confidential source added that Syrians often opted to stay away from the Syrian security apparatus so as not to encounter even more problems. The various security services in Syria seized every opportunity to obtain money from civilians, for instance by detaining them. A person would only be released once payment had been made. As the rule of law was no longer centrally administered, other factors were in what area a crime or violation was reported, what resources the local authorities had to follow up the report, and how corrupt the officials on duty were.⁴²²

⁴¹⁶ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 74.

⁴¹⁷ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 6 April 2023.

⁴¹⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 74.

⁴¹⁹ Syria Direct, *Northeastern Syria marks two years of legal paralysis as de facto authorities struggle to issue new land registry*, 30 January 2023.

⁴²⁰ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 22.

⁴²¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 71.

⁴²² Confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 31 January 2023.

8.3 Legal protection by authorities or other bodies

As the rule of law was not functioning properly in all the areas of control, the authorities did not generally provide any legal protection⁴²³ there. Sources again stated that a person had a better chance of protection if they paid a bribe or had connections. Many men had joined pro-government militias, for instance, so as to provide their relatives with some degree of protection through the resulting connections. If someone lived in an area where there was a strong local authority, as e.g. in Suweida or Deir Ez-Zour – where Arab tribes were largely in charge – and that person belonged to the local community, they could turn to the local authority for protection.⁴²⁴

8.4 Impunity

Members of the various factions in the Syrian conflict committed human rights violations and contraventions of international humanitarian law with impunity. Arbitrary detention, kidnapping, extrajudicial executions, sexual violence, civilian casualties of arbitrary air strikes, and enforced disappearances in the various areas of control went unpunished. The various factions, such as the Syrian government, the SNA and the SDF, also went unpunished for enforced displacement and the unlawful expropriation of homes, land and property. As far as could be ascertained, no government officials were charged or convicted. Nor had the Assad government taken measures to guarantee human rights.⁴²⁵

On 30 March 2022, the Syrian government passed Law No. 16/2022, which made torture a criminal offence and provided for substantial criminal sanctions. According to the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UNCOI), however, the law did not deal with the immunity granted to military and security personnel, or with abuse as such.⁴²⁶ Impunity was enjoyed particularly by officials or individuals affiliated with the authorities of the various control areas. Sources reported knowledge of cases of theft, robbery and road accidents in which the authorities did act and were able to catch and convict the perpetrators. They noted here that a prosecution was unlikely to have taken place in such cases if the perpetrator was affiliated with the Syrian government or pro-government militias.⁴²⁷

8.5 The rules in SSG territory

As stated previously in this report (§5.3.2), society in SSG territory, where HTS is in power, has become more open in recent years. Nowadays, HTS deals harshly with extremist groups, and the religious police (the *Hisbah*), who were responsible among other things for ensuring that women wore their headscarves correctly, had been disbanded. Although HTS had relaxed the rules to some extent, conservative

⁴²³ Legal protection was usually accompanied by physical protection.

⁴²⁴ Confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 8 May 2023; confidential source, 21 March 2023.

⁴²⁵ Amnesty, *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2022/23 THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS*, 27 March 2023, p. 251; SJAC, *The State of Justice in Syria 2023*, March 2023, pp. 9 and 23; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 11 and 76; confidential source, 6 April 2023.

⁴²⁶ UNCOI, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/51/45, 17 August 2022, p. 5.

⁴²⁷ Confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 7 March 2023.

rules were still in force. Women had to wear a headscarf, alcohol was strictly forbidden, minorities had restricted freedom of religion, and women and men were not permitted to attend celebrations such as weddings together. Anyone eating in the street during Ramadan could be sentenced to three months' imprisonment.⁴²⁸

There are no figures available on the numbers of court cases and sentences for non-observance of the local rules in SSG territory, however.

⁴²⁸ AP News, *Syria's main insurgent group seeks to move away from al-Qaida past, get off Western terrorism lists*, 14 May 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023.

9 Displaced persons

9.1 The situation of displaced persons in Syria

9.1.1 Numbers

The previous report of May 2022 referred to a figure of some 6.7 million displaced civilians in Syria.⁴²⁹ The World Food Programme (WFP) stated that 6.8 million people – of a total population of about 23 million – were displaced in Syria in April 2023 (see footnote 76).⁴³⁰ Of the approximately 4 million people in the north-west of Syria – a region under the control of armed opposition groups such as HTS and the SNA –, 2.8 million civilians were displaced, and in the AANES area there were some 500,000 internally displaced persons.⁴³¹ Many of the displaced persons had been displaced more than once as a result of the conflict or other causes, such as the February 2023 earthquakes.⁴³² Thousands of people in the north-west of Syria were left homeless by the 6 February earthquakes, due to the partial or complete destruction of over 10,600 buildings there.⁴³³

Of the 2.8 million displaced persons in the north-west, about 1.7 million were living in more than 1,400 camps in November 2022, the majority of whose inhabitants were dependent on food aid from international aid organisations for their survival. Following the earthquakes, many people, including women previously living in camps intended solely for women and their children ('widow camps'), ended up in collective camps where they were vulnerable particularly to sexual violence (see below, §9.1.2).⁴³⁴ There were camps for displaced persons in other control areas too. Those displaced persons who were not living in camps lived with relatives or host communities or in homes whose original occupiers had fled elsewhere. In the SIG area, for example, many Arab families lived in the homes of Kurds who had fled.⁴³⁵

It is not possible to provide a picture of the numbers and precise housing situation of displaced persons in all the control areas in Syria, given the lack of precise figures. In AANES territory – those parts where the Arab population is in the majority –, for instance, many displaced Arabs are living in unofficial temporary basic camps. They do not want to live in the camps run by the AANES, as they would then have to move to Kurdish territory; they prefer to live in an area where there is an Arab majority, according to a confidential source.⁴³⁶

⁴²⁹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 71.

⁴³⁰ WFP, *Situation Report 4 - April 2023*, 7 June 2023.

⁴³¹ Confidential source, 31 January 2023; <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/syr#> (downloaded 3 July 2023). The UNHCR figures are from May 2022.

⁴³² The Guardian, *Nine out of 10 people in Syrian camps have been displaced multiple times*, 16 March 2023; OCHA, *Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund 2023 Third Reserve Allocation – Strategy*, 22 May 2023.

⁴³³ OCHA, *Earthquakes: North-west Syria Situation Report No. 1*, 7 March 2023.

⁴³⁴ Euro-Med Monitor, *Syria: Cluster bombing of IDP camps may amount to war crime*, 6 November 2022; confidential source, 25 May 2023; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 65.

⁴³⁵ Confidential source, 6 April 2023; confidential source, 25 May 2023.

⁴³⁶ Confidential source, 25 May 2023.

9.1.2 *Conditions*

The humanitarian and security situation throughout Syria also impacted the living conditions of internally displaced persons. The omnipresent instability, lack of means of subsistence, increasing drought, and rising fuel and food prices have aggravated the socio-economic crisis throughout the country (see also Chapter 2), making the situation in many camps for displaced persons even worse. In March 2023, just under 2.1 million displaced persons (about 31% of the total displaced population) in north-west and north-east Syria were in need of food aid. Dozens of internally displaced persons also died in air strikes – in particular by the government army and the Russian army on camps in SSG territory (see also §3.5.3).⁴³⁷ The February 2023 earthquakes caused fresh waves of displacement: 89% of the people displaced by the Syrian conflict in the north-west were displaced yet again by the earthquakes of 6 February.⁴³⁸

Before the earthquakes, there had been just under thirty camps ('widow camps') in the north-west of Syria where widows of opposition fighters, as well as divorced women and wives whose husbands were missing, lived with their children. Many of those camps were rendered uninhabitable during the earthquakes, and the women and their children ended up in collective camps. These women and their children had already suffered a lot of chronic violence before the earthquakes – including neglect, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, and child marriages and child labour – in the widow camps, but sources indicated that they were even more vulnerable in the collective camps.⁴³⁹

9.1.3 *Returns of internally displaced persons*

The OCHA recorded a total of 97,978 spontaneous returns of internally displaced persons in the period from January to August 2022, more than half of which had taken place in the two provinces of Idlib (27,956) and Rif Damascus (22,631).⁴⁴⁰ Most of these displaced persons who had returned said that their reason for returning was that they wanted to recover their land and property in their original places of residence.⁴⁴¹ Another reason for returning was the improved security situation in their place of origin and/or the deterioration in the economic situation in the place where they were living.⁴⁴² OCHA figures show that several thousand internally displaced persons are returning to their original places of residence every month.⁴⁴³

These returns took place spontaneously and were not facilitated by the Syrian authorities. As in the case of returning refugees, the Syrian government did not guarantee the safe, dignified return, resettlement or local integration of internally

⁴³⁷ CARE, *12 years on: Challenges caused by the Syrian conflict show no signs of abating*, 15 March 2023; IDMC, *Country Profile Syrian Arab Republic*, 19 May 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Exodus of refugees reported in north Syria amid factional infighting*, 12 October 2022.

⁴³⁸ Action for Humanity, *No Place But Displacement: A report into multiple displacement of IDPs in Northwest Syria due to 12 years of conflict and February 6th's earthquakes*, 16 March 2023.

⁴³⁹ WVI, *Women and Children of Syria's Widow Camps: Hardest to Reach, Most at Risk*, 11 April 2022; confidential source, 25 May 2023.

⁴⁴⁰ OCHA, *HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OVERVIEW SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC*, December 2022, p. 23.

⁴⁴¹ A Syrian returnee could not expect much help from the authorities if their home had been confiscated by a group loyal to the government (see §10.6).

⁴⁴² OCHA, *HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OVERVIEW SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC*, December 2022, p. 55.

⁴⁴³ <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/syrian-arab-republic-idp-movements-and-idp-spontaneous-return-movements-data> (downloaded 29 May 2023): e.g. in July 2022 (approx. 8,000), August 2022 (approx. 11,000), October 2022 (approx. 8,000), November 2022 (approx. 9,000) and April 2023 (approx. 6,000). It is not possible to say whether there has been a clear decrease or increase, given the fluctuations in the numbers.

displaced persons (see also §9.1.3). Also, the Syrian authorities sometimes did not issue security clearance for internally displaced persons, with the result that they could not return to government territory.⁴⁴⁴ Syrian state television showed internally displaced persons in government territory returning to their original places of residence and the local authorities stating that the conditions for safe, dignified return had been created. Sources consulted reported that cases of this kind were one-offs and there are no structural initiatives on the part of the Syrian government to allow displaced persons to return to their original places of residence. It was still impossible after many years to return to particular places recaptured from the opposition by the Syrian authorities – e.g. Darayya to the south-west of the capital of Damascus –, because of the conditions there.⁴⁴⁵

Most returns of displaced persons took place within provinces, and there were few returns from one area of control to another. Plans to return remained few and far between among displaced persons in 2022, with only two per cent of them intending to return to their places of origin in the near future. Nor did the current conditions in Syria favour returning to one's place of origin, on top of which internally displaced persons ran the risk of being arrested by the Syrian authorities on returning to government territory. The SNHR counted 77 arbitrary arrests of internally displaced persons who had returned to government territory in 2022. It did not give any reasons for the arrests, however (for the reasons for arrests and detentions see §3.9).⁴⁴⁶

9.1.4

Requirements for returning to particular areas

As §4.3 states, the Syrian authorities required security clearance for a Syrian internally displaced person to travel to government territory from another area of control. If a person had an outstanding issue with the Syrian authorities, they first had to regularise their status (referred to as 'individual reconciliation') before they could return to government territory (see §1.3.2 and 10.4).

As far as could be ascertained, security clearance of this kind or individual reconciliation was not valid in the other control areas.

⁴⁴⁴ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 65; Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *What about the Return of IDPs to Areas Controlled by the Syrian Government?*, June 2022, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁴⁵ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Syria state media trumpet 'return of 2.5 million refugees'*, 20 June 2022; BBC Monitoring (Sana News Agency), *Displaced Syrians return to key Damascus town*, 20 December 2022; confidential source, 7 March 2023; Syria Direct, *Darayya's al-Khalij neighborhood 'unoccupied, destroyed houses' as hopes of return fade seven years into regime control*, 2 June 2023.

⁴⁴⁶ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 65; SNHR, *At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 Children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December*, 3 January 2023; OCHA, *HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OVERVIEW SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC*, December 2022, p. 55.

10 Returns

10.1 Numbers of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries

According to UNCHR figures, there were 5,303,746 registered Syrian refugees in the region on 11 May 2023. Türkiye had the largest number of Syrian refugees, 3,388,698,⁴⁴⁷ followed by Lebanon (805,326), Jordan (660,605), Iraq (262,218) and Egypt (145,157), respectively. There were another 41,742 registered Syrian refugees living in the rest of North Africa. There were 5,723,070 registered refugees in the neighbouring countries on 31 May 2022.⁴⁴⁸ The actual number of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers is probably higher, as not all Syrians seeking refuge in the region have been registered.⁴⁴⁹ The Lebanese government, for instance, estimated the number of Syrians who had fled to Lebanon during the conflict at 1.5 million.⁴⁵⁰ According to a confidential source, about 20,000 Syrian Palestinians had fled to Lebanon since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria. They should have reported to the UNRWA⁴⁵¹ rather than to the UNHCR in Lebanon.⁴⁵²

10.2 Countries of origin of returnees

Those in power in Türkiye and Lebanon announced during the reporting period that they intended to return more Syrian refugees to Syria, as anti-Syrian sentiment was growing among the population in both Türkiye and Lebanon. Turkish President Erdoğan said at the beginning of 2023 that restoring diplomatic relations with the Syrian government would speed up the return of Syrian refugees.⁴⁵³ Lebanon launched a voluntary repatriation programme for Syrians in October 2022. Caretaker Prime Minister Mikati stressed that his government no longer had the financial and political capacity to provide shelter for the estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees.⁴⁵⁴ In other neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Iraq, which are accommodating fewer Syrian refugees – relatively speaking –, the authorities have been less outspoken about the return of Syrian refugees.⁴⁵⁵ Lebanon and Türkiye did actually deport Syrians during the reporting period, whereas this has not been done by the Jordanian or Iraqi authorities, as far as could be ascertained (see below).

⁴⁴⁷ In the case of Türkiye, the UNHCR bases its figures on Turkish government information.

⁴⁴⁸ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> (downloaded 30 May 2023); the reason for the difference between 2022 and 2023 in the number of refugees has not been ascertained.

⁴⁴⁹ UNHCR registration of Syrian refugees in Lebanon was suspended by the Lebanese government in 2015, for instance.

⁴⁵⁰ UNCHR, *Lebanon Fact Sheet*, April 2023, p. 1.

⁴⁵¹ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is the refugee organisation of the United Nations that focuses on aid and development for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

⁴⁵² Confidential source, 2 May 2023.

⁴⁵³ BBC Monitoring (Enab Baladi), *Turkey's Erdogan says thaw with Syria will speed up refugee return*, 12 January 2023; The Guardian, *'We fear leaving the house': Lebanon and Turkey step up deportations of Syrian refugees*, 27 June 2023; Reuters, *Earthquake fans anti-Syrian sentiment in Turkey amid desperate conditions*, 13 February 2023; France24, *'I'd rather die': Syrians in Lebanon fear deportation*, 28 April 2023.

⁴⁵⁴ BBC Monitoring (Lebanese National News Agency), *Lebanon says Syria refugee repatriation 'top priority'*, 2 December 2022.

⁴⁵⁵ Confidential source, 6 April 2023.

10.2.1 Voluntary returns

According to UNHCR figures, more than 354,000 registered refugees have voluntarily returned to Syria since 2016. The true number of Syrian returnees is likely to be higher, as these are only verified figures. Of the 354,000 refugees, just under 158,000 returned from Türkiye, 76,000 from Lebanon, 65,000 from Jordan, 53,000 from Iraq, and 2,000 from Egypt. Just under 51,000 Syrian refugees had returned in 2022. The figures were lower in 2020 and 2021, with 38,235 and 35,624 Syrian refugee returnees, respectively. The number had been heading for 95,000 in 2019.⁴⁵⁶ The aim of the plan launched by the Lebanese authorities in October 2022 was to voluntarily return 15,000 Syrians per month to Syria.⁴⁵⁷ The target of 15,000 was not met in October and November 2022: only a few hundred Syrians returned with the aid of the Lebanese authorities. The number remained low in the ensuing months too. Syrians who had signed up for voluntary return sometimes failed to show up in the end.⁴⁵⁸

Most refugees from the neighbouring countries returned to the north-west and north-east of Syria – the areas not under the control of the Syrian authorities.⁴⁵⁹ The figures do not show whether the returns were permanent or whether these people left the country again some time later. Since the earthquakes in early February 2023, tens of thousands of Syrian refugees have returned, mainly to the north-west of Syria, most of them in order to bury relatives or visit those who had been affected. The Turkish authorities were said to have set a deadline for the Syrians to return to Türkiye, but to what extent it was enforced is not known.⁴⁶⁰

As the General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022 stated, it was not possible to provide precise figures on the number of Syrians who had returned permanently from Europe and the US.⁴⁶¹ This was not possible for this reporting period either, given the lack of information. On this point, sources commented that they were aware of people who had returned – temporarily – from Europe to Syria, to government-controlled territory or the north-west of the country because they did not have or anticipate problems with the authorities there.⁴⁶²

In addition to voluntary returns via official border posts, there were Syrians in Lebanon and Türkiye who returned to Syria via unofficial border posts – often temporarily. Here again this was often for family reasons, e.g. the death of a relative, or to check their property in Syria. The person returning would often opt for an unofficial border post because they wanted to stay under the Syrian authorities' radar. The numbers here are not known.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁶ https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions (downloaded 5 April 2023).

⁴⁵⁷ ICTJ, *Lebanon Plans Syrian Refugee Repatriation Within Months: Minister*, 7 December 2022.

⁴⁵⁸ ACAPS, *GLOBAL RISK ANALYSIS*, March 2023, p. 32; BBC Monitoring (Lebanese National News Agency), *Second group of Syrians return from Lebanon*, 5 November 2022; confidential source, 30 April 2023.

⁴⁵⁹ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96810> (downloaded 5 April 2023); confidential source, 27 April 2023.

⁴⁶⁰ The Economist, *Syrian earthquake survivors in Turkey have nowhere to go*, 2 March 2023; confidential source, 6 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (Hurriyet), *Turkey's defence minister says 20,000 Syrians returned to Syria after quakes*, 21 February 2023.

⁴⁶¹ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 87.

⁴⁶² Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 3 May 2023; confidential source, 13 April 2023.

⁴⁶³ Confidential source, 29 April 2023; confidential source, 3 May 2023; confidential source, 8 March 2023.

10.2.2 *Forced returns*

How many Syrians in total have been forced to return to Syria is not known, but forced returns did occur during and prior to the reporting period. Estimates of the total number of forced returns range from several hundred to several thousand. The UNHCR had not been permitted to register Syrian refugees in Lebanon for several years, with the result that it was easy to deport them, according to a confidential source. The Turkish authorities expelled Syrian refugees for minor infringements – e.g. leaving the province where the refugee was registered –, according to confidential and public sources.⁴⁶⁴ There were also doubts as to the voluntary nature of the returns of Syrian refugees from Lebanon in November 2022, for instance. The Lebanese authorities were said to have forced Syrian refugees to sign a form supposedly indicating that they were returning voluntarily.⁴⁶⁵ According to HRW, the Turkish authorities had arbitrarily arrested and detained hundreds of Syrian refugees (men and boys) and deported them to Syria between February and July 2022. The men and boys were said to have been forced to sign voluntary return forms.⁴⁶⁶

In April 2023, the Lebanese army began invading the homes of Syrian refugees throughout Lebanon on a large scale, arresting hundreds of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, including people registered with the UNCHR, and putting them over the Syrian border. Sources indicated that this took place in most cases without consultation with the Syrian authorities. The deported Syrians often found units of the Syrian security apparatus lying in wait for them. Many of the deported Syrians immediately returned to Lebanon. Some of the deported Syrians were arrested and detained on arrival in Syria.⁴⁶⁷ Precise figures are not known, however.

10.3 **Syrian government return initiatives**

Although the Syrian authorities and their ally Russia said they wanted to promote the return of Syrian refugees, various UN organisations, HRW and Amnesty International stated that the conditions for the safe, dignified return of Syrian refugees to Syria were still not in place, nor had they improved during the reporting period.⁴⁶⁸ The initiatives taken by the Syrian authorities to promote the return of refugees and/or internally displaced persons were merely for show and not substantial, according to sources consulted. The authorities had no means of successfully implementing the initiatives, given the poor economic situation in the

⁴⁶⁴ The Economist, *Syrian earthquake survivors in Turkey have nowhere to go*, 2 March 2023; confidential source, 31 January 2023; confidential source, IOM, 3 February 2023; The Guardian, *'We fear leaving the house': Lebanon and Turkey step up deportations of Syrian refugees*, 27 June 2023.

⁴⁶⁵ BBC Monitoring (Al Mamlaka), *Nearly 10,000 Syrian refugees left Jordan in 2022 – report*, 22 January 2023; confidential source, 6 April 2023.

⁴⁶⁶ HRW, *Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria*, 24 October 2022.

⁴⁶⁷ L'Orient-Le Jour, *Expulsion d'une cinquantaine de Syriens en avril*, 21 April 2023; BBC Monitoring (L'Orient – Le Jour), *Lebanon expels dozens of Syrians – report*, 22 April 2023; Amnesty, *Lebanon: Halt summary deportations of Syrian refugees*, 11 May 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023; Reuters, *Syrian refugees deported from Lebanon face arrest, conscription, say relatives*, 1 May 2023.

⁴⁶⁸ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, pp. 66-68; BBC Monitoring (Lebanese National News Agency), *Lebanon says Syria refugee repatriation 'top priority'*, 2 December 2022; HRW, *Turkey: Hundreds of Refugees Deported to Syria*, 24 October 2022; Amnesty, *Lebanon: Stop the so-called voluntary returns of Syrian refugees*, 14 October 2022; Refugee Protection Watch, *Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming*, 8 December 2022, p. 29.

country. There was therefore a lack of employment and housing for returnees.⁴⁶⁹ Sources stated that the Syrian authorities did not have any interest in the return of refugees either, as many of them were regarded as potential opposition members.⁴⁷⁰

10.4 Requirements for returning to areas controlled by the authorities

The EASO – now known as the EUAA – stated in June 2021 that Syrians wishing to return from other countries to territory under the control of the Syrian authorities – like internally displaced persons wishing to return from areas under opposition control – needed to undergo vetting before being allowed to return. As in 2021, there were two procedures that played a prominent role in making it possible to return during this reporting period: security clearance⁴⁷¹ and individual reconciliation⁴⁷² (see also §§1.3.2, 9.1.4 and 10.5).⁴⁷³

A confidential source indicated that it was difficult to provide a clear picture of these procedures, the documents required for them and the authorities involved.⁴⁷⁴ A Syrian wishing to return to territory under the control of the authorities will need at least a valid Syrian passport or Syrian identity document.⁴⁷⁵ A passport is not required to travel to Syria from Lebanon: a valid identity document will suffice, for instance.⁴⁷⁶ Whether this is the case with the other neighbouring countries has not been ascertained.

Sources differ, but most of them stated that a person needs to have security clearance in order to return to government territory. A Syrian could normally apply for clearance at a Syrian embassy abroad. Applications for security clearance made in Lebanon or Jordan were monitored by the respective authorities, and the details of the Syrian wishing to return were shared with the Syrian authorities, who would issue security clearance or not after checking the data.⁴⁷⁷ A confidential source, however, stated that in 2022 – precisely when is not known –, Syrian refugees in Jordan no longer needed security clearance to return to Syria.⁴⁷⁸ Syrians who had left Syria legally, were not wanted by the authorities and had a valid passport did not need clearance. This was essential, however, to enable arrangements to be made in Syria, e.g. reclaiming land or obtaining government documents.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁶⁹ Confidential source, 6 April 2023; Confidential source, 29 March 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023; BBC Monitoring (SANA), *Syria state outlet reports resettlement of residents in north*, 11 September 2022; confidential source, 13 April 2023.

⁴⁷⁰ Confidential source, 21 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

⁴⁷¹ 'Security clearance' in English, *muwafaka amniya* in Arabic.

⁴⁷² 'Status settlement/adjustment' in English, *taswiyat wada* in Arabic.

⁴⁷³ EASO, *Syria Situation of returnees from abroad - Country of Origin Information Report*, June 2021, p. 20.

⁴⁷⁴ Confidential source, 26 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁵ UK Home Office, *Country policy and information note: returnees, Syria*, June 2022, §5.3.2.; confidential source, 13 April 2023

⁴⁷⁶ Confidential source, 3 May 2023; confidential source, 29 April 2023.

⁴⁷⁷ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 60; EASO, *Syria Situation of returnees from abroad - Country of Origin Information Report*, June 2021, p. 13; confidential source, 13 April 2023; confidential source, 17 November 2023; Refugee Protection Watch, *Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming*, 8 December 2022, p. 24; confidential source, 10 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁸ Confidential source, 10 July 2023.

⁴⁷⁹ EASO, *Syria Situation of returnees from abroad - Country of Origin Information Report*, June 2021, p. 20; confidential source, 3 February 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

Individual reconciliation is required for a person to return if they have an outstanding issue with the Syrian authorities. In many cases this was failure to perform military service, but having attended anti-government demonstrations and being a member of opposition movements (especially armed) are also issues that need to be regularised with the Syrian authorities by means of individual reconciliation before a person can return (see §1.3.2). If the application for individual reconciliation is granted by the authorities and the person's name is removed from the wanted list, the person in question is given a document enabling them to return to Syria.⁴⁸⁰ The EASO stated in June 2021 that there was no clear distinction between applying for security clearance and regularising one's status. To what extent the procedures differed, and what documents were issued once they had been completed, is not known. During this reporting period too, it was not possible to gain a clear picture of this.⁴⁸¹

10.4.1 *Risks on returning: individual reconciliation and security clearance*

Neither security clearance nor individual reconciliation provided any guarantee of problem-free return to Syria. The security apparatus in Syria is made of up various services that do not share information systematically. A particular security service might have issued security clearance for a person who was still on another service's wanted list.⁴⁸² Specific figures are not known, but sources indicated that people who had been issued an individual reconciliation document or security clearance could still be abused, tortured, arrested or even killed by the Syrian authorities.⁴⁸³

10.5 **Requirements and procedures for returning to other areas of control**

Syrian refugees and asylum seekers are known to have returned to control areas other than government territory. No other procedures or requirements – in addition to having a valid identity document – laid down by the authorities in SSG, SIG and AANES territory before a person could return were identified during the research.⁴⁸⁴

10.6 **Treatment of and obstacles for returnees from abroad**

Syrians returning to government territory could suffer a host of human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, extortion and abuse by the Syrian authorities. Sources were unable to give precise figures for the various human rights violations, as there is no systematic monitoring of Syrian returnees and no overview of them as a whole. Estimates range from several dozen to several hundred.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁰ UK Home Office, *Country policy and information note: returnees, Syria*, June 2022, §2.4.1.

⁴⁸¹ EASO, *Syria Situation of returnees from abroad - Country of Origin Information Report*, June 2021, p. 20.

⁴⁸² UK Home Office, *Country policy and information note: returnees, Syria*, June 2022, §2.4.1.

⁴⁸³ Refugee Protection Watch, *Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming*, 8 December 2022, p. 10. UK Home Office, *Country policy and information note: returnees, Syria*, June 2022, §2.4.9; confidential source, 17 November 2022; confidential source, 21 March 2023.

⁴⁸⁴ North Press Agency, *About 20,000 Syrians return from quake-affected Turkey*, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023.

⁴⁸⁵ Amnesty, *Lebanon: Stop the so-called voluntary returns of Syrian refugees*, 14 October 2022; HRW, *World Report 2023 – events of 2022*, 12 January 2023, p. 583; USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 18; OHCHR, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 7 February 2023, p. 10; confidential source, 17 November 2022; TIMEP, *The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees*, 23 January 2023; confidential source, 13 April 2023.

The SNHR, for instance, recorded 228 cases in 2022 of arbitrary arrest and/or detention of internally displaced persons or Syrian refugees who had returned to territory under the control of the authorities: 77 cases of internally displaced persons and 151 cases of refugee returnees, most of them from Lebanon. Apart from the fact that those arrested and/or detained included eight children, six adult women and eleven elderly people, the SNHR did not give a detailed profile of them.⁴⁸⁶

Syrian returnees also faced economic problems. Many of them had difficulty finding work, for example, and had problems paying for basic needs such as food. Many found their homes partly or completely destroyed and could not afford to repair the damage. In some cases, a Syrian returnee's home had been confiscated, for instance by an armed group loyal to the Syrian government. The government did not provide any assistance with repairing homes or other financial aid. Nor could a Syrian returnee expect much help from the authorities if their home had been confiscated. Syrian returnees who were unable to return to their homes had to rely mainly on relatives. Given the across-the-board deterioration in the situation in the country, it was difficult for Syrian returnees – as for many other Syrians – to access basic services such as education, running water, medical care and electricity (see also Chapter 2).⁴⁸⁷

It is not possible to provide a clear picture of the other areas of control, given the lack of information. Various sources agreed that the treatment of a Syrian returnee would depend on their attitude towards the local authorities and how those authorities regarded them. A Syrian who had no problems with the Syrian authorities, had left the country legally, and was regarded as pro-government – or at least had not been involved in opposition activities – would generally encounter few if any problems, according to those sources. According to confidential sources, a person could normally return to the other control areas without problems if they had no outstanding issues with those authorities, which did not regard them as a threat.⁴⁸⁸

10.7 Groups with increased risks to their safety on return

In June 2021 the EASO stated that, according to sources it had consulted, certain groups ran a greater risk of arrest, (temporary) detention, interrogation, torture and charges of terrorism by the Syrian authorities if they returned to Syria. These were as follows:⁴⁸⁹

- Those who had been involved in anti-government demonstrations and/or belonged to the opposition
- Those whose relatives had been involved in anti-government demonstrations and/or belonged to the opposition

⁴⁸⁶ SNHR, *At Least 2,221 Arbitrary Arrests/Detentions Documented in Syria in 2022, Including 148 Children and 457 Women (Adult Female), with 213 Cases Documented in December*, 3 January 2023.

⁴⁸⁷ USDoS, *SYRIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT*, March 2023, p. 18; confidential source, 17 November 2022; TIMEP, *The Selective Return of Syrian Refugees*, 23 January 2023; confidential source, 13 April 2023.

⁴⁸⁸ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 3 April 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023; confidential source, 13 April 2023.

⁴⁸⁹ EASO, *Syria Situation of returnees from abroad - Country of Origin Information Report*, June 2021, pp. 27-28.

- Those on whom the government had a security dossier or who were on a wanted list
- Those who had left Syria illegally
- Those coming from an area that had been under opposition control
- Those returning from countries regarded by the Syrian authorities as hostile⁴⁹⁰
- Those who still needed to do their military service
- Women and children whose husband, father and/or brother are missing.⁴⁹¹

The sources, both public and confidential, contacted to obtain information for this information report provided the same picture as the EASO. The general view provided by the sources was as follows: the greater the risk that the Syrian authorities considered a person posed to those currently in power because of their opposition activities and/or other behaviour, the greater the risk of encountering problems on return. The sources were unable to provide a precise profile of the factors involved here, and what standards the authorities applied.⁴⁹²

A confidential source indicated that the Syrian authorities never forgot anything and there was no time limit on opposition activities as far as they were concerned. An opposition activity such as attending a demonstration in the early stages of the conflict could still be used against a person wishing to return to Syria after many years, according to that source. According to another source, it was not the case that the Syrian authorities had kept a record of all opposition activities, but a person might still report a neighbour or relative to the authorities (see also §5.1.7).⁴⁹³

10.8 Return routes

10.8.1 From Iraq

Three border crossings between Iraq and Syria were open (with restrictions) in April 2023. The Peshkhabur⁴⁹⁴ and Al-Yaroubiya crossings provided access from Iraq to AANES territory. The Al-Qaim crossing was on the border between Iraq and Syrian government territory.⁴⁹⁵

The Peshkhabur border crossing was open for commercial traffic at the beginning of 2022. It was also open, with restrictions, for individuals crossing the border, including people stranded in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), and people in AANES territory with an Iraqi or foreign passport.⁴⁹⁶ The UNHCR reported in May 2022 that only particular categories of people (Syrians) could obtain a thirty-day entry visa for the KRI at the Peshkhabur crossing at that time. These included people trying to achieve family reunification with immediate family members, brides coming for the purpose of marriage, people with severe medical conditions, traders, people with an embassy appointment in the KRI, and people wishing to transit through Erbil airport.

⁴⁹⁰ The EASO does not name any specific countries here. To what extent this was affected by rapprochement between Syria and particular countries is not known.

⁴⁹¹ Many people went missing at the hands of the Syrian authorities, for instance because of their opposition activities. Their relatives could also be regarded as opponents, according to a confidential source: confidential source, 29 March 2023.

⁴⁹² BBC Monitoring (SOHR), *War monitor says Syrian survivors of migrant shipwreck face arrest at home*, 28 September 2022; confidential source, 14 March 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023.

⁴⁹³ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 29 March 2023.

⁴⁹⁴ Also spelled 'Faysh Khabur'.

⁴⁹⁵ Middle East Monitor, *Syria and Iraq agree on cross-border trade*, 31 January 2023.

⁴⁹⁶ North Press Agency, *Crossing in Semalka-Faysh Khabur resumed*, 24 January 2023.

Those wishing to return to Syria voluntarily from the KRI had to go to the Derabon Returns Centre at the Peshkhabur border crossing for help and advice.⁴⁹⁷

Following the earthquakes in early February 2023, the Al-Yaroubiya border crossing was opened to provide humanitarian aid in March 2023. Before the earthquakes, the AANES authorities had expressed their disappointment at the UN Security Council's unanimous decision to permit humanitarian aid solely to the north-west of Syria via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Türkiye.⁴⁹⁸ This was the first time that aid had entered via the Al-Yaroubiya border crossing since January 2020, when it was closed as a result of a Russian-Chinese veto in the UN Security Council.⁴⁹⁹

At the end of January 2023, Syria and Iraq decided to permit travellers and goods access to the two countries via the Al-Qaim border crossing.⁵⁰⁰

10.8.2 *From Jordan*

Jordan decided in September 2021 to fully reopen its main border crossing with Syria. The Nassib-Jaber crossing was open during the reporting period.⁵⁰¹

10.8.3 *From Lebanon*

There were six official border crossings between Lebanon and Syria in April 2022. The area of Syria that borders Lebanon is entirely under Syrian government control. The crossing points were Mitraba, al-Masnaa, al-Dabousiya, Jusiya, Tal Kalakh and al-Arida. As regards the border between Lebanon and Syria too, there were many unofficial crossing points in addition to the official ones. As far as could be ascertained, no border crossings were added or closed during the reporting period.⁵⁰²

10.8.4 *From Türkiye*

Only the Bab al-Hawa border crossing was open in March 2022, enabling crossings to take place between Türkiye and the Syrian province of Idlib. In addition to the Bab al-Hawa crossing, more crossing points had been fully opened in April 2023 due to the February 2023 earthquakes. Two more border crossings in the province of Aleppo provided access from Türkiye to SIG territory, namely Al-Rai and Bab al-Salameh.⁵⁰³ In addition to these three crossing points, five border crossings were open in April 2023 from Türkiye to SIG and SSG territory, and one from Türkiye to the area under the control of the authorities – the province of Latakia –, with restrictions.⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁷ UNCHR, *For Syrians entering and leaving the Iraqi Territory through Peshkhabur Border Crossing Point*, 3 May 2022: Kurdistan24, *Peshmerga injured after PKK attempts to cross Peshkhabur border*, 29 July 2022.

⁴⁹⁸ BBC Monitoring, *Kurds express disappointment at UN cross-border assistance extension*, 17 January 2023.

⁴⁹⁹ North Press Agency, *AANES receives aid convoy from KRI's Sulaymaniyah*, 7 March 2023.

⁵⁰⁰ Middle East Monitor, *Syria and Iraq agree on cross-border trade*, 31 January 2023.

⁵⁰¹ Reuters, *Jordan fully reopens border crossing with Syria, seeks trade boost*, 30 September 2021; Roya News, *Seven-truck aid convoy to be sent to Syria, says Jordan*, 18 February 2023.

⁵⁰² Enab Baladi, *Syria, Lebanon agree new crossing to control border chaos*, 26 April 2022;

Asharq al-Awsat, *Lebanon Sees Signs of New Wave of Syrian Displacement*, 1 April 2023.

⁵⁰³ UN, *Briefers Stress to Security Council Syria's Worsening Situation Needs Fully Funded Humanitarian Response Plan, 12-Month Extension of Cross-Border Aid Mechanism*, 29 June 2023; North Press Agency, *About 20,000 Syrians return from quake-affected Turkey*, 3 April 2023; VOA News, *Syria Extends Opening of 2 Border Crossings with Turkey for Quake Aid*, 13 May 2023: How long these border crossings will remain open is not known.

⁵⁰⁴ OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic – Turkey/Syria: border crossing status*, 31 March 2022: 1. **Open:** Humanitarian, commercial and individual crossings are permitted (permission is not required for every movement taking place, the rules are flexible, and long-term permission can

As the General Country of Origin Information Report on Türkiye 2022 stated, Türkiye completed a 764 kilometre-long wall along its southern border with Syria in June 2018. In spite of this obstacle, individual Syrians succeeded in crossing the Syrian-Turkish border illegally.⁵⁰⁵ There were still unofficial crossing points at which goods and passenger traffic took place during this reporting period.⁵⁰⁶ At the end of April 2023, Human Rights Watch (HRW) – which claimed to have obtained information from a humanitarian organisation that wished to remain anonymous – reported that Turkish border guards were torturing Syrians trying to enter Türkiye illegally and subjecting them to excessive violence. They were also said to be shooting at Syrians trying to cross the border illegally. More than 200 deaths had been caused in this way between October 2015 and April 2023, according to HRW. HRW also stated that Turkish border guards had been responsible for eleven deaths and twenty injuries along the Syrian-Turkish border since the beginning of 2023, according to the SOHR.⁵⁰⁷

10.8.5 *Via Damascus international airport*

The website of Damascus international airport states that there are direct flights from Damascus to airports in Iraq (Al-Najaf, Baghdad, Basra and Erbil), Lebanon (Beirut), the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah), Qatar (Doha), Pakistan (Karachi), Kuwait (Kuwait City), and Oman (Muscat), among others.⁵⁰⁸ The Greek airline Air Mediterranean inaugurated the first air service in eleven years between the European Union and Syria on 9 March 2023, with one of its aircraft departing from Athens to Damascus.⁵⁰⁹

10.9 **Checks, procedures and treatment at border crossings**

As the previous report on Syria stated, independent organisations were not permitted to monitor the international Syrian borders, with the result that information on procedures and practices when Syrian returnees entered was very limited. During this reporting period too, little information emerged on checks and procedures at border crossings.⁵¹⁰

The treatment that a person could expect at the border would depend on how much potentially problematic information was available on them at the crossing concerned (see also §3.9.2). To what extent officials at a particular crossing had access to a central database of information on people wanted by the Syrian authorities is unclear. Some sources considered that there was a central database that could be

be obtained). 2. **Restricted:** Permission is required from the authorities for every crossing – humanitarian, commercial or individual. 3. **Closed:** No crossings permitted.

⁵⁰⁵ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Türkiye 2022*, 4 April 2022, p. 73.

⁵⁰⁶ The Syrian Observer, *Smuggling Market from Syria to Turkey Stagnates; Costs Halved*, 12 August 2022; Daily Sabah, *'Border Eagles' protect Türkiye-Syria boundary with domestic equipment*, 4 December 2022; confidential source, 27 April 2023.

⁵⁰⁷ HRW, *Turkish Border Guards Torture, Kill Syrians Turkey Should End Impunity*, 27 April 2023; SOHR: (syriaahr.com) (downloaded 4 July 2023).

⁵⁰⁸ https://www.damascus-airport.com/en/flights_damascus_syria.php (downloaded 20 April 2023).

⁵⁰⁹ Greek City Times, *Greece's Air Mediterranean to inaugurate first flight from Europe to Syria in over a decade!*, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 4 July 2023.

⁵¹⁰ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Syria 2022*, 31 May 2022, p. 83.

accessed from the border posts, whereas others denied the existence of any such database (see also §6.1.7).⁵¹¹

To what extent Syrians wishing to leave Syria required an exit visa has not been ascertained. A confidential source stated that government officials and men of military service age still needed permission from the government or the army to leave the country.⁵¹²

10.10 International and other organisations providing assistance to returnees

The UNHCR regarded the conditions in Syria as un conducive to safe, voluntary and dignified return.⁵¹³ Syrians who had returned to Syria did not therefore enjoy any systematic monitoring by or support from UN organisations. In a survey of Syrian returnees conducted in 2022, 72% of respondents answered that they had not been monitored by the UNCHR after returning to Syria.⁵¹⁴ There are local and international NGOs that provide support to Syrian refugees and asylum seekers who have returned and internally displaced persons. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) provides support in the areas of education, psychological support and healthcare. There are also organisations in Europe that assist Syrian returnees on their return with training, coaching, financial support and counselling.⁵¹⁵ In spite of the efforts of these organisations, only a small number of returnees were contacted and supported. Many Syrians returned without reporting this to appropriate organisations – mainly out of fear of being regarded as refugees by the authorities (see §10.12). Syrian returnees were sometimes able to rebuild their lives with the support provided, but in many cases they found themselves in financial and other difficulties as a result of the current situation in Syria.⁵¹⁶

10.11 Arrangements by neighbouring countries to facilitate temporary returns

As noted in §10.2.1, more than 350,000 people have returned to Syria from the neighbouring countries in recent years.

Türkiye

Following the February 2023 earthquakes, Türkiye enabled Syrians who had been living in the provinces affected to return temporarily. Syrians who had been living in the provinces of Gaziantep, Kilis, Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Osmaniye, Adıyaman, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Malatya, Adana and Elazığ and had temporary protection status from the Turkish authorities were given permission to return for a maximum

⁵¹¹ Confidential source, 31 January 2023; confidential source, 8 March 2023; confidential source, 21 March 2023.

⁵¹² Confidential source, 8 March 2023.

⁵¹³ Refugee Protection Watch, *Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming*, 8 December 2022, p. 10.

⁵¹⁴ Refugee Protection Watch, *Endless Refuge and Unsafe Homecoming*, 8 December 2022, p. 5; confidential source, 30 April 2023.

⁵¹⁵ <https://www.solidroad.nl/over-ons/> (downloaded 21 April 2023); <https://jrs.net/en/country/syria/> (downloaded 21 April 2023); <https://goedwerkfoundation.nl/> (downloaded 21 April 2023).

⁵¹⁶ Confidential source, 13 April 2023; confidential source, 28 March 2023; HRW, *World Report 2023 – events of 2022*, 12 January 2023, p. 583; Equal Times, *Syrian refugees returning home face poverty and danger*, 3 October 2022.

of six months.⁵¹⁷ Syrian activists expressed concern that, even with the measures that the Turkish authorities had taken following the earthquakes, there was still a risk that Türkiye would not allow Syrians to return after their temporary stay in Syria.⁵¹⁸ It was also possible for Syrians to return to their native country temporarily before these measures were introduced, but in some cases that voluntary return could be regarded as a reason for the Turkish authorities to withdraw their temporary protection status.⁵¹⁹

Jordan

According to a confidential source, a Syrian refugee living in Jordan could return to Syria for a maximum of two months, but they would need permission from the Jordanian Ministry of Interior. In order to return, they would need at least to be able to show a passport and permission from the Ministry.⁵²⁰

Lebanon

As far as could be ascertained, the Lebanese authorities have not made any special arrangements for the temporary return of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers to Syria. Syrians who have lived in Lebanon legally can return to Syria. In order to return to Lebanon, these Syrians need to be able to present particular documents, such as a valid identity document and a letter of invitation from a Lebanese sponsor.⁵²¹

10.12 Risks on returning after living in a Western country

As noted in §10.7, those returning from countries regarded by the Syrian authorities as hostile⁵²² ran increased risks to their safety on return. Sources confirmed this point, some of them saying that a person who had left Syria because of the general situation there could attract the attention of the authorities by that mere fact. Many returnees tried to keep any asylum application in the West or elsewhere secret.⁵²³

Sometimes, however, Syrians who had been granted asylum in the West returned to Syria – permanently or temporarily – without encountering any problems with the authorities there. Confidential sources stated that these people were usually pro-government or at least not afraid of returning to government territory (see also §10.6).⁵²⁴

As regards the consequences for a person's safety or social situation on returning to the other areas of control after living in a Western country, it is not possible to

⁵¹⁷ North Press Agency, *About 20,000 Syrians return from quake-affected Turkey*, 3 April 2023; Al Jazeera, *After earthquakes, Syrians utilise new rules to cross from Turkey*, 9 March 2023.

⁵¹⁸ North Press Agency, *About 20,000 Syrians return from quake-affected Turkey*, 3 April 2023; Al Jazeera, *After earthquakes, Syrians utilise new rules to cross from Turkey*, 9 March 2023.

⁵¹⁹ <https://help.unhcr.org/turkiye/information-for-syrians/rights-and-obligations/> (downloaded 21 April 2023); Time, *It Took an Earthquake for These Syrian Refugees to Feel at Home in Turkey*, 23 June 2023.

⁵²⁰ Confidential source, 30 April 2023.

⁵²¹ Confidential source, 28 April 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁵²² These are countries that have imposed or supported sanctions against Syria, for example.

⁵²³ Confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 27 April 2023; confidential source, 28 April 2023.

⁵²⁴ Confidential source, 7 March 2023; confidential source, 13 April 2023; confidential source, 3 May 2023; confidential source, 31 March 2023; confidential source, 2 May 2023.

provide a clear picture. According to a confidential source, a person could return to SSG territory, for instance, if they had not previously had any problems with HTS.⁵²⁵

⁵²⁵ Confidential source, 3 April 2023.

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11.2 Key to Abbreviations

AANES	-	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
COAR	-	Center For Operational Analysis And Research
DIS	-	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	-	European Asylum Support Office
EUAA	-	European Union Agency for Asylum
HTS	-	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
HRW	-	Human Rights Watch
HXP	-	<i>Hêzên Xweparastinê</i>
ICG	-	International Crisis Group
ICRC	-	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICTJ	-	International Center for Transitional Justice
IDMC	-	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
ISIS	-	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
NLF	-	National Liberation Front
PYD	-	Democratic Union Party
RIC	-	Rojava Information Centre
RSF	-	Reporters without Borders
SACD	-	Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity
SDC	-	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	-	Syrian Democratic Forces
SEA	-	Syrian Electronic Army
SIG	-	Syrian Interim Government
SJAC	-	Syria Justice and Accountability Centre
SNA	-	Syrian National Army
SNC	-	Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces
SNHR	-	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	-	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
SSG	-	Syrian Salvation Government
STJ	-	Syrians for Truth & Justice
Timep	-	Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy
UNRWA	-	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
WFP	-	World Food Programme
YPG	-	People's Protection Units
YPJ	-	Women's Protection Units

11.3 Map of Syria



Source: Managementboek.nl