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European Asylum Support Office

Syria

Socio-economic situation: Damascus City

Country of Origin Information Report

February 2020

SUPPORT IS OUR MISSION



Syria

Socio-economic situation:

Damascus City

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

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Disclaimer

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

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

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

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

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

This report was finalised on 30 January 2020. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

¹ The EASO methodology is largely based on the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI), 2008, and can be downloaded from the EASO website: <http://www.easo.europa.eu>.

Glossary and Abbreviations

Al-Yarmouk camp	Main refugee camp for Palestinians; located in Damascus
DAM	Damascus International Airport
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
GBV	Gender-based violence
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; Daesh; Islamic State; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MoH	Ministry of Health
<i>Mohafaza</i>	Territorial administrative subdivisions used in Syria; Syria has 14 such governorates
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
PHC	Primary Healthcare Centre
SYP	Syrian Pound
<i>Wasta</i>	Networks of support based on patronage

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information regarding the socio-economic situation in Damascus City for use in the context of international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, especially in view of the EASO country guidance development on Syria.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)² and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Guide (2019).³

This report should be read in conjunction with further 2019-2020 EASO COI reports on Syria, such as reports titled [Security situation \(November 2019\)](#), [Actors \(December 2019\)](#), [Exercise of authority in recaptured areas \(January 2020\)](#), [Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#), and other reports published on the EASO website. These reports provide relevant information regarding topics such as the main armed actors, targeted violence, and armed conflict developments in Syria for the purpose of developing country guidance on Syria.

Methodology

This report contains information on the conflict in Syria since 2011 but focuses primarily on recent trends, with updated information on 2019 where available. The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 3 January 2020. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received from the peer review and quality control process, up until 30 January 2020.

The terms of reference (ToR) of this report were defined by EASO based on discussions held and input received from COI experts in the EASO Specialist COI network on Syria and from policy experts in EU+ countries⁴ within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria.

The ToR for this report can be found in the [annex II](#). This report covers a number of key socio-economic indicators useful for understanding the socio-economic situation in Damascus, as well as mobility related issues.

Due to the fast depreciation of the Syrian pound (SYP), in places in the report where unconverted SYP information appears, an approximate conversion has been added using historical currency conversion based on the time the source was published. To illustrate the currency drop's impact in Syria, note that in January 2020, for example, the Financial Times reported that the Syrian Pound was in a 'freefall' and that there had been estimated increased prices changes in staple foods in Syria between October and December 2019 that went up in Damascus as follows: cooking fuel (about 38 %), milk (over 30 %), meat (almost 30 %), water (25 %). Across Syria, food commodities have increased in price by 20-30 % since October 2019.⁵

Quality control

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

² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

³ EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

⁴ All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

⁵ FT, Syrian regime struggles to sop currency freefall, 20 January 2020, [url](#)

Sources

This report largely relied on open source information available through online desk-based research. The report also draws heavily from two reports: the Danish Immigration Service COI report on the socio-economic situation in Damascus city (March 2019)⁶, based on Skype interviews with sources in Damascus and Beirut, and the joint Danish Immigration Service / Danish Refugee Council COI report on the security situation in Damascus Province and issues regarding return to Syria (February 2019)⁷, based on interviews conducted between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus.

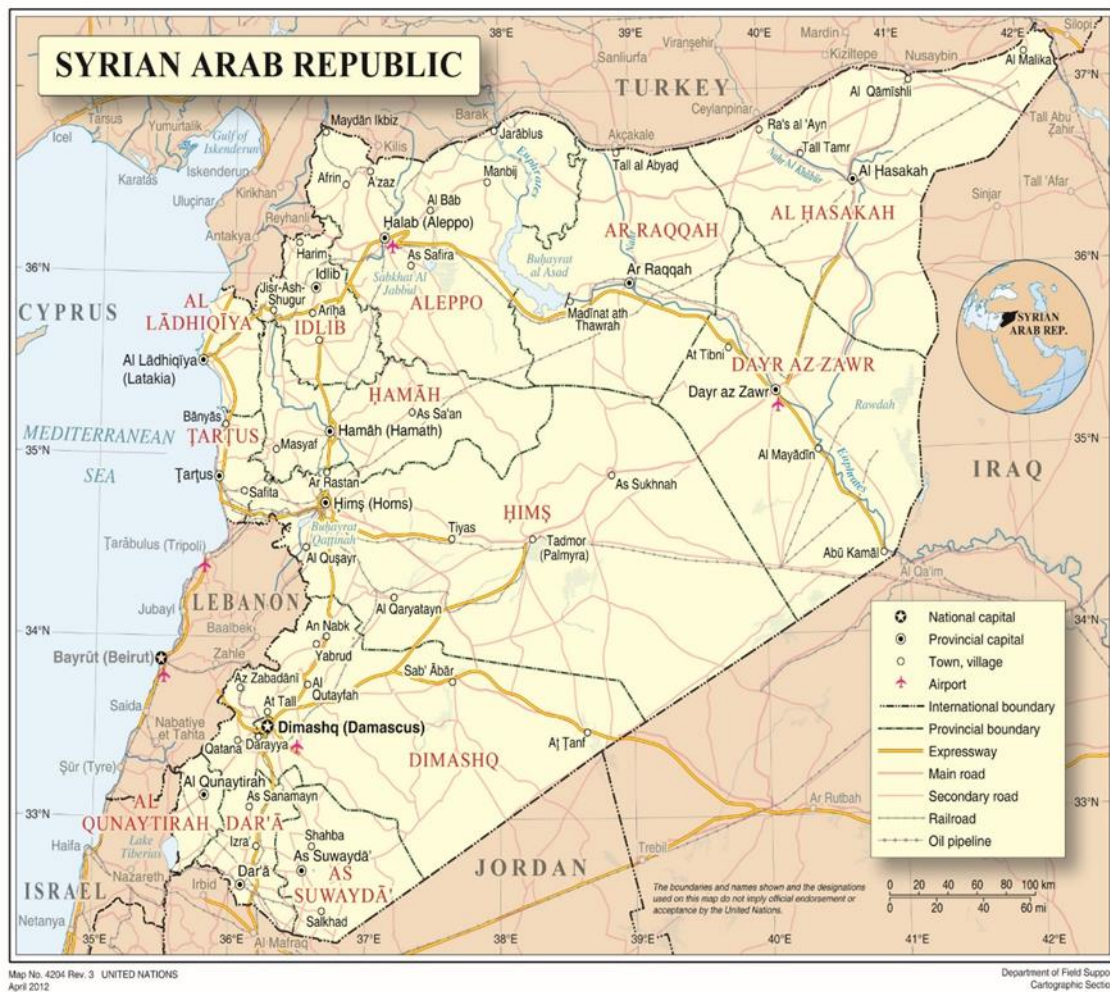
Structure and use of the report

The report is structured in line with the [Terms of Reference](#). The first section provides a brief overview of Damascus City; the second chapter covers issues related to freedom of movement; the third chapter provides an overview of key socio-economic indicators for Damascus; and the final section provides information on certain groups such as orphans and victims of sexual/gender-based violence, and networks of support.

⁶ Denmark, DIS, The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 6

⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#)

Map



Map 1: Syria, United Nations⁸

For a detailed map of Damascus city, consult the reference map of 2016 created by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).⁹

⁸ UN, Syrian Arab Republic, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, [url](#)

⁹ UNOCHA, Damascus City Reference Map as of 22 September 2016, 29 September 2016, [url](#)

1. City overview

The city and the governorate of Damascus is divided into 16 main administrative districts: Barzeh, Qaboun, Jobar, Al-Shaghour, Al-Midan, Al-Qadam, Kafr Sousa, Dummar, Al-Mazze, Rukn Al-Din, Al-Salihiyah, Al-Mouhajrin, Saroujah, Al-Qanawat, Old Damascus, and Al-Yarmouk camp.¹⁰ Damascus is the capital of the Syrian Arab Republic, located in the southwest of the country. It is Syria's principal city and is surrounded by the territories of the Governorate of Rural Damascus.¹¹ The administrative boundaries between the city of Damascus and Rural Damascus are difficult to distinguish due to close connections between their environs.¹²

1.1 Demographics and ethno-religious composition

According to the latest general census of population and housing, conducted by the Syrian government in 2004, the governorate of Damascus had 1 552 161 inhabitants, 796 212 of whom were men and 755 949 women.¹³ The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of the Governorate of Damascus at 1 849 000 as of the middle of 2014 and 2 011 000 as of 2016.¹⁴ UNHCR estimated a total population of the capital at 1 925 387, comprising 1 273 068 resident inhabitants, 647 602 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 4 717 returnees, as of the end of 2017;¹⁵ returnees increased to 16 200 by 2019 according to UNOCHA reporting.¹⁶ The US government's CIA World Factbook gives an estimate of 2.4 million as of 2019.¹⁷ Urban areas of the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus and Aleppo have the largest figures regarding the population share of people over the age of 60 in Syria.¹⁸

Accurate and updated information on the ethno-religious composition of Damascus could not be found. In its report on religious freedoms in Syria for 2018, the US Department of State (USDOS) reports on the presence of Alawites, Twelver Shia, and Christians in Damascus, without specifying the size of the communities.¹⁹

According to church statistics, the Armenian community in Damascus comprised around 10 000 Armenian Orthodox and around 4 000 Armenian Catholics as of 2010.²⁰ USDOS stated that it was unclear if any Jews remained in Syria; there had been a small community in Aleppo and Damascus prior to the civil war with less than 20 Jews remaining by 2012.²¹ The Christian population in Damascus remained largely stable²² and not affected by migration at the same level as other Syrian cities. As

¹⁰ ACU, The Demographic Change & Forced Displacement in Syria. Homs – Damascus & its Rural – Aleppo & its Rural, 20 June 2017, [url](#), p. 18; Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#)

¹¹ Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 901

¹² Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

¹³ Syria, Central Bureau Of Statistics, General Census, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁴ Syria, Central Bureau Of Statistics, Statistical Abstract for years 2012-2017, 2017, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵ UNHCR, Syria/Damascus/Factsheet, January - December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 30-31

¹⁷ US, CIA, The World Factbook, Middle East: Syria, last updated 9 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 25

¹⁹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report for 2018 - Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰ Gulf News, Syria's Armenian quarter, 29 October 2010, [url](#)

²¹ USDOS, International Religious Freedom Report for 2018 - Syria, 21 June 2019, [url](#), p. 4

²² Oehring, O., Christians in Syria: Current Situation and Future Outlook, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, February 2017, [url](#), p. 15

stated by the Syriac Catholic Archbishop, the Syriac Catholic Archdiocese of Damascus is comprised of about 1 000 families, compared to 1 200 families before the war.²³

Many districts and neighbourhoods of Damascus and its environs are formed according to ethnicity and/or religions of their inhabitants.²⁴ Thus, the Kurds largely reside in the districts of Rukn al-Din and Barzeh and poor informal settlements, for example in the Wadi al-Mashari neighbourhood in Dummar.²⁵

1.2 Displacement and return

There were a total of about 625 000 long-term internally displaced people in Damascus, according to UNOCHA's 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) report on Syria from March 2019.²⁶ IDPs live on 43 sites in Damascus, the majority of which are 'collective centres' (public buildings, factories, etc used to house 5 or more IDP families) or informal settlements where they encounter poor access to basic services.²⁷

UNOCHA provided an excel table published in January 2020 that provides a summary of IDP movements and IDP spontaneous returns in Syria for 2017-2019, including in Damascus²⁸:

Governorate	2016 Total	2017 Total	2018 Total	2019 Total	Total
Aleppo	821,865	642,694	494,190	437,874	2,396,623
Al-Hasakeh	59,506	297,408	32,016	136,773	525,703
Ar-Raqqa	65,314	491,081	22,490	58,101	636,986
As-Sweida	12,833	3,809	12,661	362	29,665
Damascus	24,579	47,053	7,479	2,409	81,520
Dar'a	226,843	125,605	130,256		482,704
Deir-ez-Zor	42,814	253,366	26,304	51,558	374,042
Hama	146,246	105,067	15,029	2,412	268,754
Homs	63,188	25,241	4,511	13,385	106,325
Idlib	529,168	639,321	685,891	1,095,958	2,950,338
Lattakia	15,702	16,528	18,365	16,703	67,298
Quneitra	7,232	21,801	24,787	39	53,859
Rural Damascus	118,854	113,783	148,844	2,602	384,083
Tartous	14,354	14,310	11,161	9,754	49,579
Grand Total	2,148,498	2,797,067	1,633,984	1,827,930	8,407,479

Figure 1: UNOCHA, Syria: IDPs arrival to governorate (incl. displacement to location within governorate or from outside)²⁹

²³ Crux, New Damascus archbishop eager to give hope to tired faithful, 23 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁴ Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

²⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

²⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 16, 31

²⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 56-58

²⁸ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data for Dec-2019 [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], January 2020, [url](#)

²⁹ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data for Dec-2019 [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], January 2020, [url](#)

Governorate	2017 Total	2018 Total	2019 Total	Total
Aleppo	469,729	177,790	64,455	711,974
Al-Hasakeh	10,287	18,709	54,530	83,526
Ar-Raqqa	62,081	160,861	11,824	234,766
As-Sweida	199	2,460	1,645	4,304
Damascus	6,971	12,822	342	20,135
Dar'a	13,540	446,710	89,552	549,802
Deir-ez-Zor	524	173,636	78,905	253,065
Hama	120,757	48,019	24,870	193,646
Homs	9,540	35,129	43,960	88,629
Idleb	32,817	138,085	79,919	250,821
Lattakia	132	605		737
Quneitra	665	42,751	8,583	51,999
Rural Damascus	37,068	156,995	35,550	229,613
Grand Total	764,310	1,414,572	494,135	2,673,017

Figure 2: UNOCHA, Syria: IDP return movements to governorate (2017-2019 data summary)³⁰

1.3 Humanitarian situation and assistance

UNOCHA's 2019 HNO report stated that in 2018, there were 'some areas that changed territorial control have witnessed reduced restrictions imposed on humanitarian access as well as civilian and commercial movement, resulting in overall improvements in the humanitarian situation, such as areas in southern Damascus'.³¹ However, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index for 2019 rated Damascus as the least liveable city for the seventh year in a row out of 150 cities ranked for their urban quality of life.³² The inhabitants are reported to face difficulties with purchasing cooking gas and foodstuffs and finding affordable housing.³³ Due to a high number of IDPs, the capital has faced a decline in healthcare and basic, secondary, and university education.³⁴

³⁰ UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data for Dec-2019 [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], January 2020, [url](#)

³¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 36

³² The Economist Intelligence Unit is the research and analysis division of The Economist Group, the sister company to The Economist newspaper. It submits an annual report which ranks 150 cities for their urban quality of life. With sectarian militias, attacks, and daily detention of civilians, the overall situation in Damascus ranks the least by the EIU's standards of liveability, which include stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure. Scene Arabia, This Arab city was ranked the least liveable in the world in 2019, 4 September 2019, [url](#)

³³ Syria Direct, Between bread queues and shifting red lines, war-weary Damascus residents navigate a city in flux, 1 April 2019, [url](#)

³⁴ Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 911

According to the 2019 HNO by UNOCHA, there were 713 000 reported as ‘people in need’³⁵ in Damascus governorate and 468 000 ‘people in acute need’.³⁶ UNOCHA reported that about 38 % of people with the ‘highest severity of needs’ (1.9 million people), are in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, ‘while another 38 per cent are in government-controlled areas of Damascus, Rural Damascus, Dar’a and Quneitra governorates’.³⁷

The majority of ‘people in need’ in Syria live in areas under government control including Syria’s four major cities (Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo) as well as ‘most provincial capitals’, according to UNOCHA.³⁸ There are a range of UN agencies, international humanitarian organisations and civil society NGOs providing humanitarian assistance and aid to displaced persons in Syria. They provided food, medical assistance, and vaccinations, but required government authorisation to do so, which was not always granted, sometimes preventing organisations from doing their work.³⁹ IDPs remain heavily dependent on humanitarian assistance as a coping mechanism.⁴⁰

UNOCHA’s HNO 2019 provided the following breakdown regarding the population of people in need in Syria, including in Damascus Governorate, broken down by the sector of need⁴¹:

³⁵ According to UNOCHA, People in Need (PIN) refers to ‘people whose physical security, basic rights, dignity, living conditions or livelihoods are threatened or have been disrupted, and whose current level of access to basic services, goods and protection is inadequate to re-establish normal living conditions within their accustomed means without assistance. People in acute need refers to those facing more severe forms of deprivation in terms of their security, basic rights and living conditions and face life-threatening needs requiring urgent humanitarian assistance’. UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8

PIN and acute PIN have been calculated based on the inter-sector severity categorisation tool which is accessible at: <https://hno-syria.org/#severity-of-needs>

³⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 31

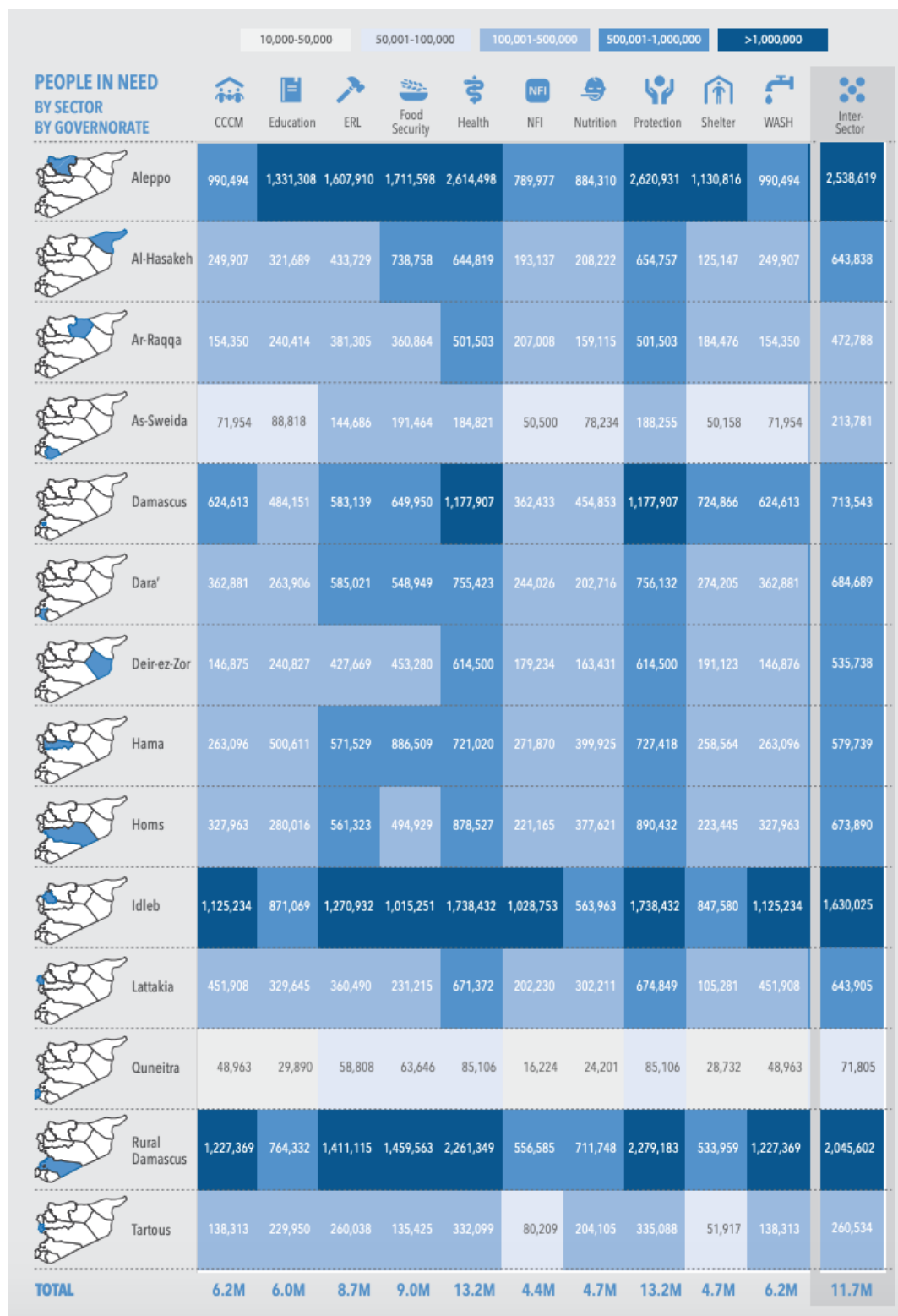
³⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 34

³⁸ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 36

³⁹ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation, (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 77; UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 43

⁴⁰ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 52

⁴¹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 32. Sector abbreviations: CCCM (camp coordination and camp management, including camp living conditions); ERL (Early Recovery and Livelihoods, including employment, basic social services, livelihoods, social cohesion); NFI (Non-Food Items, including basic items like fuel and clothing); WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, including sewerage)

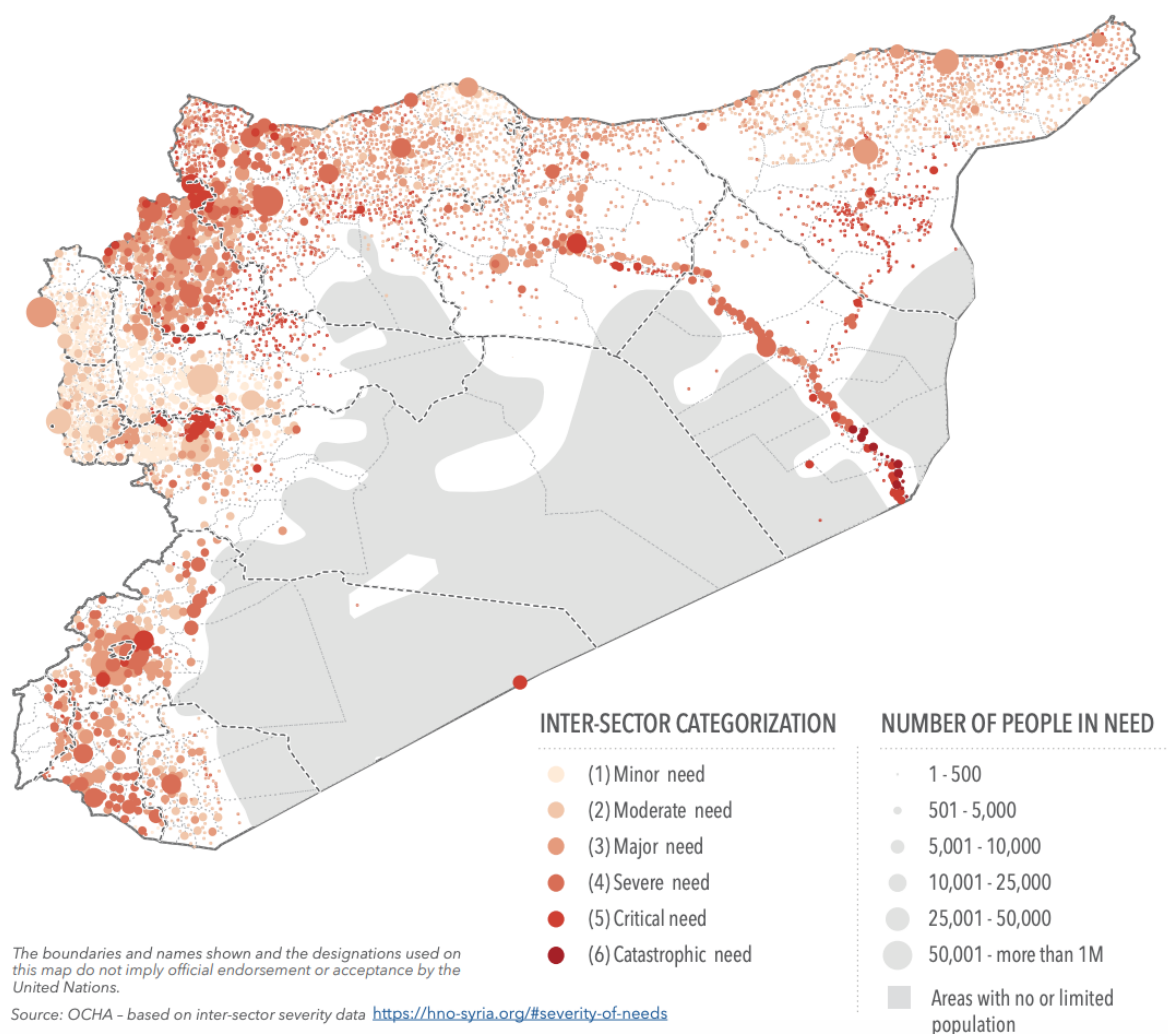
Figure 3: UNOCHA, People in Need By Sector and Governorate⁴²

The UNOCHA's inter-sectorial severity of needs map for 2019 provides an overview of the areas with the most people in need⁴³:

⁴² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 32

⁴³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 35

INTER-SECTORAL SEVERITY OF NEEDS, 2019

Figure 4: UNOCHA, Inter-sectoral severity of needs 2019⁴⁴

⁴⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 36

2. Freedom of movement

2.1 Freedom of movement

Freedom of movement is provided for under the Syrian constitution unless restricted by a ‘judicial decision or by the implementation of laws’; however, in practice, within the country, the government and armed groups restricted mobility and used checkpoints to control access to territory; the unpredictability and violence ‘severely restricted movement throughout the country’.⁴⁵

Citizens are allowed to travel internationally but the government denied access to passports and civil documentation based on political views, association with the opposition, or geographical location associated with the opposition. The Syrian government imposed exit visa requirements and closely monitored Damascus airport and border crossings.⁴⁶ USDOS reported that the government ‘comprehensively banned international travel of opposition members, often targeting any such individual who attempted to travel’ and human rights groups reported that activists and their families feared being attacked at airports and border crossings upon attempting to leave.⁴⁷

The Danish Immigration Service (DIS) wrote that as of August 2018, the government announced a circular that Syrians who left the country illegally during the war would not encounter problems because of illegal exit; whilst previously, under Law 14 of 2014, illegal exit was punishable in principle with imprisonment and fines. The DIS produced a 2019 report on consequences of illegal exit, in which sources stated that they did not know of cases of people punished solely for illegal exit; noting that those who face problems on return are those with other security problems with the government. According to two sources interviewed by DIS, ‘by legalizing their status at a Syrian representation abroad prior to return to Syria, persons who have left Syria illegally can return without facing any problem’.⁴⁸ However, sources indicate that Syrians who return must agree to sign loyalty pledges to the government, including providing extensive background information and signed statements to cooperate with authorities, or must enter reconciliation agreements.⁴⁹ According to a 2019 report on risks of return to Syria, produced by the European Institute of Peace (EIP)⁵⁰, ‘all Syrians returning to the jurisdiction of the state are forced to interact directly with the security sector’ including volunteering extensive background information that may incriminate them or their family members with no guarantees about how information will be used, with security services controlling local and individual reconciliation processes, returns of refugees and IDPs and reconstruction efforts in Syria.⁵¹ According to Amnesty International (AI), returning refugees require the government’s prior approval to return and those wishing to return to their area of origin are requested to undergo a security clearance and interrogation by security services.⁵²

⁴⁵ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 47-48

⁴⁶ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 47-48

⁴⁷ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 49

⁴⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-7

⁴⁹ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6; Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#); News Deeply, Dangerous Exit: Who Controls How Syrians in Lebanon Go Home, 8 August 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁰ The EIP is an independent European peacemaking organisation that initially launched by the Foreign Ministers of Sweden and Finland in 2010. It provides practical and technical expertise and policy advice on conflict resolution. It was founded to support European efforts to respond to global peace challenges. After consultations with EU governments, conflict resolution organisations, EU institutions, and senior peace and security experts, EIP’s statutes were signed in 2014. The founding members of its Board of Governors were Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. EIP, About Us, n.d., [url](#)

⁵¹ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-8

⁵² AI, Q&A- Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature? 12 June 2019, [url](#)

The EIP reported in July 2019 that the overall number of returning Syrians and IDPs to Syria was a ‘tiny percentage’ of the 13.2 million Syrians displaced in and out of Syria; with the UN being unable to keep direct oversight over returns due to lack of access estimates are difficult and vary between the government of Syria, Russia, and UNHCR.⁵³ UNHCR’s Portal on Refugee Returns to Syria stated that there had been 230 418 ‘self-organized refugee returns’ documented by UNHCR from 2016 to 31 December 2019.⁵⁴

The UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated in February 2019 that, at that time despite changes in the situation in Syria, those returning face a lack of rule of law, widespread human rights violations and poor economic prospects; ‘safe and sustainable returns’ were not possible due to continuing hostilities.⁵⁵ In March 2019, UNHCR published its regional operational framework for refugee return to Syria in which UNHCR stated that although the pace of returns to and within Syria has increased over the past two years, ‘sufficient guarantees are not yet in place to allow for large-scale facilitated voluntary repatriation’.⁵⁶ The German government’s website with information about voluntary returns, consulted on 6 December 2019, states that IOM does not support voluntary returns to Syria due to the ‘difficult situation’ within the country.⁵⁷

2.2 Damascus Airport and flight connections

Damascus International Airport (DAM) is located 30 km southeast of downtown Damascus; about 30 minutes by car.⁵⁸ Damascus airport is reportedly controlled by Air Force Intelligence services.⁵⁹ Air Force Intelligence also reportedly controls Qamishli airport.⁶⁰ Security corporation Gardaworld wrote on 28 November 2019 that the security situation at Damascus airport had ‘improved significantly’ over the past 12 months, however, there was still an ‘elevated risk’ of collateral damage to aircrafts due to Israeli airstrikes on the Iranian presence there.⁶¹ In January 2019, Israeli airstrikes on alleged Iranian targets cause extensive damage to the Damascus airport facilities.⁶² According to Gardaworld, as of 5 April 2019 most of Syria’s airports are not in operation and while Damascus International Airport is identified as operational, ‘most flights have been suspended’. Travel into Syria from Lebanon via land border crossings is also possible.⁶³ Similarly, a February 2019 report by the DIS and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) indicated that the airport is ‘partially operational’ but that most people who return from foreign countries enter through the Lebanese land border and that the large majority of returning refugees do not do so through the airport; those who enter from the airport are ‘middle class’ Syrians. The airport is reportedly running ‘very slowly’ due to the conflict impact, stated the report.⁶⁴ Damascus International Airport’s website posts a weekly timetable which, when checked in November 2019, showed arrivals coming from Iraq, Dubai, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.⁶⁵

⁵³ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 18

⁵⁴ UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions – Self-organized Refugee Returns to Syria 2016-2019, n.d. [Last updated 31 December 2019], [url](#)

⁵⁵ UN, Human Rights Council, UN Commission of Inquiry: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible, 28 February 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁶ UNHCR, Regional Operational Framework for Refugee Return to Syria, March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁵⁷ Germany, BAMF, and IOM, Country Information – Syrian Arab Republic, n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁸ DAM, Maps of Damascus Airport, n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁹ New York Times (The), Inside Syria’s Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent, 11 May 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰ SOHR, Intelligence of the regime releases tens of citizens women of “Arbin” after being arrested at Qamishli airport northeast Syria, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹ Gardaworld, Syria – Country Report, Executive Summary, updated 28 November 2019, [url](#)

⁶² Times of Israel, Satellite images show damage at Damascus airport after Israeli raids, 22 January 2019, [url](#)

⁶³ Gardaworld, Syria – Country Report, Transportation, updated 5 April 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁴ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 26-27

⁶⁵ DAM, Damascus airport timetable, [url](#); the website provides schedules for Monday through Sunday and all days were checked/clicked. The flight tracking website Flightaware also provided a list of flights arriving into Damascus from

In terms of domestic flights, Cham Wings offers domestic flights between Damascus and Qamishli on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.⁶⁶

2.3 Wanted lists

Syria's security services maintain 'wanted lists' that may be checked at checkpoints.⁶⁷ The wanted lists are for conscripts and those believed to be involved in opposing the Assad government. The head of Air Force Intelligence has publicly claimed that its lists have 3 million names. This number could not be verified. Syrian news site Zaman al Wasl also published a list with 1.5 million names.⁶⁸ Each branch of Syria's security services has its own wanted lists and they 'do not coordinate their lists' for clearing names, according to several sources interviewed for a DIS/DRC report. The same source stated that it was generally difficult for people to know their status with the Syrian government; however, those with money and connections can find out if their name is on wanted lists but this risks exposing them and is not a guarantee against difficulties, including risk of arrest.⁶⁹ Passing through Syrian government checkpoints has been reported to be linked to treatment such as arrest and extra-judicial detentions, torture, and forced disappearances.⁷⁰ Sources reported that individuals who disappear and are detained risk torture, arrest, execution, unfair trials, as well as death in detention.⁷¹

Sources reported on disappearances and arrests on return to Syria⁷², including from Damascus international airport.⁷³ About 18 women and children from Arbin were reportedly arrested at Qamishli airport and held for a month in 2019 at a military detention centre after arriving there from DAM.⁷⁴

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)⁷⁵ reported that from 2014 - August 2019 it documented at least 1 916 arrests of Syrian refugees who returned to Syria; of these, 1 132 were released and 784

destinations Iraq, Kuwait, Dubai, and Qatar. Flightaware, Arrivals: Damascus Int'l Airport (Damascus), n.d. [accessed 29 November 2019], [url](#)

⁶⁶ Cham Wings, Reservations [DAM to KAC], n.d. [accessed 29 November 2019], [url](#); Flight tracking website Airportia shows regular Cham Wings Airlines scheduled flights from DAM to Qamishli on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays] at Airportia, Al-Qamishli Airport KAC Arrivals, n.d., [url](#)

⁶⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 15; EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 12; HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#); MEI, Despair and Decay – East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule, November 2019, [url](#), p. 9

⁶⁸ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁶⁹ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁷⁰ SNHR, At least 202 Cases of Arbitrary Arrests Documented in Syria in November 2019, 2 December 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 5, 9; HRW, Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#); Denmark, DIS, Syria – Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 12, 15; Irish Times (The), Road to Damascus: the Syrian refugees who want to go home, 2 December 2017, [url](#); Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#); SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁷¹ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-13; Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#); SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 3; SAWA, Unpacking Return: Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 31-32

⁷² FP, A Deadly Welcome Awaits Syria's Returning Refugees, 6 February 2019, [url](#); New Arab (The), The risk of return: Why going home is not an option for all Syrians, 18 September 2019, [url](#); Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#); SAWA, Unpacking Return: Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 31-32

⁷³ New York Times (The), Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent, 11 May 2019, [url](#); Irish Times (The), Arrests and torture of Syrian refugees returning home reported, 17 March 2018, [url](#); Irish Times (The), Road to Damascus: the Syrian refugees who want to go home, 2 December 2017, [url](#)

⁷⁴ SOHR, Intelligence of the regime releases tens of citizens women of "Arbin" after being arrested at Qamishli airport northeast Syria, 18 October 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁵ SNHR is an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation involved in documenting human rights violations in Syria, adhering to the standards and international conventions on human rights issued by the UN. For more information, visit: SNHR, About Us, n.d., [url](#)

remained detained, of whom 638 were ‘forcibly disappeared’. SNHR documented 15 cases of returnees who were reportedly killed due to torture. Cases of arrests and enforced disappearances of refugees who had settled their cases with security services through consulates or committees for reconciliation were also reported.⁷⁶

2.4 Checkpoints

A February 2019 report by DIS/DRC indicated that, according to sources they interviewed, there are checkpoints on the road between the airport and Damascus city.⁷⁷

DIS/DRC reported that according to several different interviewed sources, checkpoints have ‘significantly been reduced’ in Damascus province and in the city since May 2018 (90 % removed) and are concentrated around the central Old City and Mazzeh District; though they are mostly focused on entrances into Damascus, such as highways from Lebanon, at the airport, and on the M5 Highway toward Homs. There are greater numbers of checkpoints in former opposition-held areas and still occasional ‘flying checkpoints’ by pro-government forces, though mainly in areas such as Eastern Ghouta.⁷⁸ According to the same source, different forces control checkpoints in different areas of Damascus, particularly intelligence services, and especially Air Force Intelligence, as well as regular units like the 4th Armoured Division and the Republican Guard. Regarding the thoroughness of checks, Air Force Intelligence is reportedly considered the ‘strictest’. DIS/DRC sources reported varying information on procedures at checkpoints: some stated that checks within Damascus are ‘often very cursory’; others stated that checks at entrances and outside the city are ‘more thorough’ than inside the city; while another said that inside the city and at the entrance of Damascus city, individuals passing checkpoints are ‘controlled rigourously’ and DIS/DRC noted that the procedure and thoroughness depend on the force in charge.⁷⁹

According to several sources listed by DIS/DRC in their February 2019 report, ‘at fixed checkpoints at entrances and in areas in Damascus province outside the city authorities are looking for wanted people, conscripts and evaders from military service’.⁸⁰ Similarly, a confidential source in the Netherlands’ 2019 COI report on Syria, almost all checkpoints have the capacity to check a person’s background and military service status and these checks are made by a range of different agencies on a computer or by phone at both mobile and fixed checkpoints. The report noted that the fact that a person can pass a checkpoint without any checks on one day is not a guarantee this will happen the next day; even those who are not sought can experience problems such as temporary detention or having to pay bribes to pass the checkpoint.⁸¹ Christopher Kozak, Syria analyst for Institute for the Study of War (ISW), was interviewed by the DIS for a report on access to Damascus published in September 2019; he stated that the ‘Syrian government is suspicious of all individuals intending to enter Damascus City for being affiliated with the armed opposition, including individuals from former opposition-held areas’. An international humanitarian organisation explained that ‘everyone is guilty until proven innocent’. Multiple sources stated that the ‘level of opposition activity in an area’ (past and present) and security sensitivity of the region of the person’s residence/registration are key to whether access to Damascus through checkpoints is allowed or not, noting that Eastern Ghouta and Douma residents had particular likelihood to be subjected to checks and questioning, or requiring

⁷⁶ SNHR, The Syrian Regime Continues to Pose a Violent Barbaric Threat and Syrian Refugees Should Never Return to Syria, 15 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

⁷⁷ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁷⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p.13

⁷⁹ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 14

⁸⁰ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁸¹ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation, (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 53

approval to enter Damascus.⁸² The founder of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an independent network that reports on human rights violations in Syria, said in the same DIS report that if persons can document that they stayed abroad or not in an area controlled by the opposition during the conflict they will 'less likely face scrutiny at checkpoints'.⁸³

Multiple sources interviewed by DIS/DRC for their February 2019 report mentioned several profiles that risk encountering difficulties at checkpoints; multiple sources that spoke to DIS/DRC mentioned that affiliation/connection with opposition groups impacted treatment at checkpoints ranging from increased scrutiny, to difficulties, to risk of detention. One source in the same report said that 'very few people' encounter difficulties; authorities are checking IDs for wanted people and those with armed group affiliations.⁸⁴ However, the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD)⁸⁵ interviewed 350 returnee Syrians and stated to the Washington Post that it is exceptional if 'nothing happens to you' when returning to government-held areas, noting that 75 % of the returnees they spoke to were harassed at checkpoints, government offices, on the street, or conscripted, or arrested.⁸⁶

According to EIP, reporting in July 2019, particular risk profiles for arrest tend to be those who return to Syria without security permission or reconciliation in place prior to traveling, individuals who work or carry out activities believed to oppose the government ('journalism, aid work, local councils, rescue workers, men of military age, and those with family members who were forcibly displaced to Idlib or Aleppo').⁸⁷ Profiles mentioned by DIS/DRC in their February 2019 report who were more likely to encounter problems included a similar list:

- 'People originating from former opposition-held areas and people who had residence in such areas', who may be subject to increased scrutiny or problems at checkpoints⁸⁸; Christopher Kozak also mentioned that people generally suspect people from opposition-held areas but that the level of scrutiny depends on factors such as ethnicity, sect, political history and wanted status.⁸⁹
- 'Affiliation or connection to opposition groups has an impact on treatment at checkpoints, which includes treatment ranging from additional scrutiny, facing difficulties and risk of being withheld or detained';⁹⁰
- Men in the age range for obligatory military service (18-42) 'face the most difficulties when passing checkpoints' according to two sources interviewed by DIS/DRC; one of the sources stated that 'young men are at most risk when passing checkpoints,' due to the need to clarify their exact status with the government.⁹¹

⁸² Denmark, Syria – Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9; See also UN, Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), para. 73

⁸³ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 10

⁸⁴ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 15, 16, 17

⁸⁵ SACD is 'a civil-rights grassroots population movement established by citizens from different regions of Syria' that promotes the rights of Syrian refugees and IDPs through advocacy. It has 'no political affiliation'. For more information, see: SACD, What is the SACD, n.d., [url](#)

⁸⁶ Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁷ EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 5

⁸⁸ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 15

⁸⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁹⁰ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 16

⁹¹ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 17

- People with similar names to ‘wanted people’ may also face scrutiny and there have been reports of people being detained due to this, but usually those with ‘good connections’ are released.⁹²

The DIS further remarked in its September 2019 report on access to Damascus that since the government’s retaking areas of Damascus in summer 2018, minorities such as Christians, Shiite Muslims, Alawites, and Druze are ‘not subjected to interrogation or checks at the checkpoints in Damascus’.⁹³ However, they may be questioned if their name and place of residence on their ID card does not indicate that they are a minority; however, an international humanitarian organisation in the report remarked that a person’s political affiliation and perceived loyalty was of greater focus of government scrutiny than ethnicity. Family members of individuals perceived to oppose the government may be subjected to arrest, according to a source interviewed by DIS/DRC. The DIS/DRC report also stated that individuals who are on the Syrian authorities’ wanted lists ‘would face serious problems such as degrading treatment and arrest at checkpoints’.⁹⁴ Conscripts who are caught are ‘sent directly to a military training camp’ for 6 months, followed by military service.⁹⁵

The World Bank’s 2020 report on mobility of displaced Syrians stated that insecurity ‘disproportionately’ affected women and intensified restrictions on them, as they ‘face greater risks in access to livelihoods and security’ as their ‘legally restricted mobility’ has been further impacted by security and honour concerns in the conflict environment. The same report cited the UN Habitat’s 2016 report on urban communities, providing a graph showing that perceptions about restrictions on freedom of movement in Syria were highest for: people without civil documentation (23 %), women traveling alone (17 %) and girls traveling alone (11 %). In the same graph, 7-9 % of respondents perceived other groups to have movement restrictions: men and boys and accompanied women and girls who had a male companion.⁹⁶ USDOS reported that women over 18 can legally travel without male permission, but husbands can file orders to prevent them from leaving Syria; additionally, cultural pressure and violence ‘severely restricted’ the movement of women in many areas of Syria.⁹⁷ UNFPA wrote in 2019 that in Damascus governorate specifically, there were movement restrictions on women and girls due to fear of gender-based violence (GBV) being perpetrated against them.⁹⁸

For more information on the situation of women see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#)

2.5 Civil documentation

According to a December 2019 COI report by the Netherlands, multiple confidential sources stated that Syrian citizens must be able to identify themselves with an identity card from age 14; one confidential source stated that the document is of ‘great importance’ as freedom of movement is restricted by the presence of checkpoints of both the Syrian state and non-state actors.⁹⁹

⁹² Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18

⁹³ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 11

⁹⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas, September 2019, [url](#), p. 12

⁹⁵ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 17-18

⁹⁶ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 70 (Based on the graphic/table from UN Habitat Urban Community Profiling Survey, 2016). Unable to access the original UN source in the World Bank Report.

⁹⁷ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 47-49

⁹⁸ UNFPA/WoS, Voices from Syria 2019 – Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview – Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility, 2019, [url](#), pp. 61-62

⁹⁹ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, Documents, December 2019, [url](#), p. 51

The World Bank's 2020 report analysing the social and economic mobility of displaced Syrians comments on the security-civil documentation nexus by citing the UN's 2018 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) in Syria for 2018, remarking that 'lack of civil documentation and insecurity feed each other'. Drawing on the HNAP, the World Bank stated that roughly 40 % of Syrians surveyed lacked some form of official civil document (birth, marriage, or death certificate, ID card, family booklet, or passport). However, this condition varies drastically across governorates:

'Whereas more than 8 out of 10 residents lack some official document in Idleb, almost the entire population in the governorates of As-Suweida and Homs was able to obtain the desired documentation (about 99 percent). Lack of access to civil documentation was also grave for the populations of Lattakia, Tartous, and Ar-Raqqa (about 75 percent for all three governorates). In addition to geography, a person's displacement status also affects the ability to obtain civil documentation.'¹⁰⁰

According to the same source, IDPs and returnees to Syria without civil documentation encountered a range of barriers, which varied in different regions of the country, but related to the following: being unable to register birth/marriage/death, unable to access humanitarian assistance, restricted freedom of movement, inability to access basic services such as healthcare and school registration, inability to claim property, and arrest.¹⁰¹ Overall in Syria, 40 % of respondents (host community, IDPs, returnees) said their freedom of movement was limited by lack of civil documentation.¹⁰² A World Bank table about the impact of lack of civil documentation on Syrians, based on UNOCHA's HNAP 2018 data, showed that the governorates with the highest number of people who lacked or had family who lacked civil documentation were Idleb (80 % or more), Lattakia, Tartous, Ar-Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo. In Damascus governorate, around 5 % of the host community respondents surveyed indicated they or a family member were lacking 'official Government of Syria-issued documentation'. Among the returnees surveyed in Damascus, the figure of those who lacked official documentation was slightly less than 5 %. Among the IDPs, the figure was, on the contrary, higher, around 10 %. The reasons given for not obtaining the official documentation were the absence of Government of Syria (GoS) services to issue or replace the document (about 25 %) and that they could not afford to do so (nearly 50 %); security was not one of the reasons given. By contrast other governorates mainly listed security and lack of GoS services as the main reasons.¹⁰³

Of those who lacked documents in Damascus, the impact of the lack of civil documentation was given by respondents as: restrictions on freedom of movement (nearly 60 % of respondents), the inability to claim property (nearly 40 %), and the inability to access humanitarian aid (5 %).¹⁰⁴

The Syrian Ministry of Interior and UNHCR jointly produced a booklet on Syrian personal documentation in 2018 that states that identity card applications shall be filled at the civil registry where the applicant's records are kept, or at the central department of Civil Affairs in the governorate where they reside.¹⁰⁵ Confidential sources from the Netherlands MFA's July 2019 COI report stated that it is theoretically possible for a displaced person to request and obtain civil documentation in government areas, however that office would need to access documents in the person's home region, which is not always possible, leading the MFA to state that 'the possibilities for IDPs from opposition areas to obtain documents in government areas remain limited'. Additionally, the report remarked that 'this practice prevents some Syrians from applying for documents from the Syrian authorities or

¹⁰⁰ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 68

¹⁰¹ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 69 (Summary of the graphic/table)

¹⁰² World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), pp. 11, 68

¹⁰³ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 68 (Summary of the graphic/table 2.3)

¹⁰⁴ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 69 (Summary of the graphic/table)

¹⁰⁵ Syria/UNHCR, Civil Documentation and Registration in the Syrian Arab Republic, July 2018, [url](#), p. 5

Syrian diplomatic representations, as they fear that this may cause problems for themselves or their loved ones'.¹⁰⁶

3. Key socio-economic indicators

3.1 Economic overview

The World Bank's 2020 report stated that the conflict has caused large numbers of casualties and has had 'devastating consequences for Syria's economic activity' due to the destruction of physical and human resources, forced migration and dissolution of economic networks.¹⁰⁷ Syria's GDP decreased by 63 % between 2010 to 2016.¹⁰⁸ In December 2019, the Syrian Pound rapidly declined in value, causing an overall increase in price of staple goods, including in Damascus.¹⁰⁹ International sanctions against Syria have reinforced the negative impact of the conflict on the Syrian economy.¹¹⁰ Bloomberg News reported in April 2019 that the UN estimates that Syria needs roughly 250 billion USD to (re-) launch its economy. The same article noted that Syria lacks funding from allies like Iran and Russia, while facing economic pressure and embargos from the US, and the impact on Damascus city has caused struggles with basic essentials: declines in economic activity, power cuts, gas shortages, and strains on Syrian 'social fabric'.¹¹¹

The SACD's 2019 report on the situation of returnees to government-held areas in 2019 reported that, in a general sense, 'corruption and extortion' by the government and its militias reportedly 'permeate every aspect of life for returnees', including the ability to carry out menial tasks, obtain documents, or transport goods to market.¹¹² Corruption and bribes at checkpoints are a standard practice.¹¹³

3.2 Food security

According to UNOCHA's 2019 HNO, 6.5 million Syrians were 'food insecure'; in 2018, the proportion of people who were food insecure at the national level dropped 5 % compared to 2017.¹¹⁴ The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) reported in its October 2019 update on Syria that food insecurity is 'widespread' across Syria due to high fuel and food prices, loss of livelihoods and reduced food production.¹¹⁵ Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR) reported that food availability 'declined significantly' across Syria due to the conflict, with the perception of household food availability declining from 97 % before the conflict to 60 % during the conflict; with the greatest difficulties being in non-government controlled areas of the country. The government-controlled areas of Latakia, Suweida and Tartous had 'reasonable availability of food'.¹¹⁶ The study found that there were higher perceptions about lack of access to food in Raqqa, Quneitra, Hasaka, and the countryside/rural areas around Damascus.¹¹⁷ The WFP reported in September 2019 that about 14 % of households in

¹⁰⁶ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 78

¹⁰⁷ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 73

¹⁰⁸ World Bank, The Toll of War, 10 July 2017, [url](#), p. vii

¹⁰⁹ Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ Syria Direct, Economic crisis looms as Syrian pound plummets to an all-time low, 26 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹ Bloomberg, Waiting 19 Hours for Gas in a Lifeless City, 26 April 2019, [url](#)

¹¹² SACD, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹¹³ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation, (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 54

¹¹⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 64

¹¹⁵ WFP, WFP Syria – Country Brief, October 2019, [url](#), p. 1

¹¹⁶ SCPR, Food Security and Conflict in Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 37

¹¹⁷ SCPR, Food Security and Conflict in Syria, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 47-48

Damascus City had ‘inadequate food consumption’ levels; while the highest rates of inadequacy were in Aleppo (41 %), Raqqa (39 %), Latakia and Homs (34 %), among others.¹¹⁸

UNOCHA stated in November 2017 that ‘food is widely available in Damascus albeit at high prices’. The driving factors for food insecurity in Damascus City were identified as the high concentration of IDPs, high food prices, limited employment opportunities and households with highly eroded livelihood coping strategies.¹¹⁹ Similarly, in a March 2019 report by the DIS, who carried out a series of interviews with sources for a report on the socio-economic situation, sources stated that ‘there is no shortage of basic food items in Damascus City, and all items are found at different qualities and prices’. The same source remarked that there has been ‘a drastic increase in food prices due to a drop in the value of the Syrian pound. Low-income groups in the city can still afford to purchase basic food items but they have to prioritise and rationalise their food purchases due to the recent sporadic increase of prices of some basic food items. People’s income does not match the expenses. Many families have to rely on their extended family and networks, or financial support from friends or relatives abroad to afford to feed their families’.¹²⁰

Syrians often require multiple jobs to cover food costs.¹²¹ UNOCHA reported in March 2019 that the costs of monthly food rations in Syria take about 80 % of a day labourer’s salary and about 50-80 % of a public servant’s salary.¹²² As of November 2019, the Syrian pound’s drop in value caused fluctuations in prices of goods and impacted monthly incomes of Syrians.¹²³ The currency drop also caused food prices to increase and raising concerns that shortages of staple goods would soon follow.¹²⁴

3.3 Housing and shelter

Syria is a highly urbanised society (estimated 73 %) with 37 % of the urbanised population living in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo.¹²⁵

According to the World Bank, reporting in 2019, the conflict in Syria has ‘severely impacted the housing sector, with a significant share of residential units that have been partially damaged or fully destroyed, housing investment disrupted, quality of living space deteriorated, and land and property rights severely challenged’. The conflict has caused an increase in rural to urban migration, and in areas with ‘relative security and consistency of services’ there have been ‘large influxes, with the net result being a significant concentration of population (IDPs and hosts) in urban areas’.¹²⁶ During the conflict years from 2011-2018, Damascus became a principal area of refuge for rural populations and Damascus has experienced a ‘housing crisis’, increased costs, unemployment and shortages in basic services; many IDPs fled to informal settlements with high population density.¹²⁷

Due to damage to housing stock and physical damages to housing infrastructure in conflict-affected areas, ‘houses are not available for rent in most communities’ and only a minority can afford the rent despite living in dwellings that do not offer ‘adequate protection from weather’ or are ‘not served

¹¹⁸ WFP, Syria m-VAM (August - September 2019) Issue no. 40, [url](#)

¹¹⁹ UNOCHA/WoS, Food Security Situation in Syria, November 2017, [url](#), pp. 17-18

¹²⁰ Denmark, DIS, The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 6; The interviews were conducted with the following organizations: World Health Organisation (WHO) in Damascus, the Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) of Mercy Corps, an international humanitarian organization based in Damascus, and a humanitarian organization in Syria.

¹²¹ Los Angeles Times, Syria (barely) survived a civil war. Can it weather the latest financial crisis?, 29 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 64

¹²³ AW, Syrian currency hits all-time-low, 22 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁴ Los Angeles Times, Syria (barely) survived a civil war. Can it weather the latest financial crisis?, 29 November 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁵ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 108

¹²⁶ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 108. See also the related report: World Bank, The Toll of War, 10 July 2017, [url](#), pp. 18-28

¹²⁷ Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), pp. 911-912

well by public services’ accessible to services.¹²⁸ The DIS report on Damascus City from March 2019 also stated that in recent years the cost of houses has been prohibitive meaning that ‘most people cannot afford buying or renting a house or a flat inside the city’ and forcing many to live in poor suburbs such as Mazzeh or Rukn al-Din where basic services are available but the infrastructure is ‘vulnerable’, meaning slight damage can impact a larger area.¹²⁹ Costs of rent and living are lower in the suburbs with many Damascenes moving out to those areas, according to a 2019 paper by Yasser Abdin, an urban planning professor at Damascus University, published in the International Review of the Red Cross (IRRC).¹³⁰ In Damascus city, ‘rental problems’ were the highest housing-related concern to returnees (more than in any other region), followed by looting, and lastly property damages due to conflict, according to the World Bank’s 2020 report on the mobility of displaced Syrians.¹³¹

The World Bank’s 2017 ‘Housing Deprivation Index’ summarised the average percentage of housing that was ‘deprived’ across 10 different dimensions of housing amenities, such as lack of heating or leaking during rain.¹³² The index for Syria indicated that the national average is 28 %; Damascus City ranked at around the same as the national average, compared to Idlib (near 50 %) and Latakia (close to 10 %).¹³³

According to a source interviewed by DIS, in the past, ‘individuals had to obtain a security clearance to rent a property inside Damascus City, but this requirement has been waived’; while another source DIS interviewed explained that there were reports ‘that when people registered their leased house with the local authorities, officers from security divisions would pay a visit to the leased house’ as a new way of carrying out security checks instead of requiring a clearance.¹³⁴ The Austrian COI Unit’s October 2019 Country Report on Syria stated that according to information received in 2019 from its confidential sources, Syrians returning to Syria cannot just settle in any place under government control and that establishing residence is only possible with the approval of authorities. At the beginning of 2019, the Syrian Ministry of the Interior announced that it would no longer require a security clearance as a prerequisite for registering a lease with municipalities¹³⁵, but that a lease would be registered at the municipality and the data then forwarded to the security authorities, so that the security authorities could only raise objections afterwards. Apart from Damascus, this has not yet been implemented. Outside Damascus, clearance must still be obtained. There were also reports regarding Damascus that Syrians from other areas were not allowed to settle there.¹³⁶

Displacement and property issues

In April 2018, the government passed Law No. 10, which authorises municipalities across Syria to ‘ earmark zones within their administrative boundaries’ for redevelopment and reconstruction. This was an extension of the 2012 Decree No. 66 which was aimed at redeveloping ‘unauthorized housing and informal settlements [slums] across Syria’. Under Law No. 10, once the areas is ‘designated’ under

¹²⁸ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 109. See also the related report: World Bank, The Toll of War, 10 July 2017, [url](#), pp. 18-28

¹²⁹ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹³⁰ Abdin, Y., The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, International Review of the Red Cross Volume 99, Issue 906, April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

¹³¹ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 114 and graphic on p. 115

¹³² ‘Deprivations surveyed included lack of insulation from the cold, leaking during rain, limited ventilation, overcrowding, lack of internal privacy, unable to secure house, lack of cooking facilities, lack of bathing facilities, lack of lighting, lack of heating and whether there is any other common inadequacy. The Index is the average number of deprivations (out of 10) in each governorate.’ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 110

¹³³ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 110

¹³⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8

¹³⁵ Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria [Updated October 2019], p. 84, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation; SLJ, SLJ Twitter Short message from 29 January 2019, [url](#), accessed 22 January 2019

¹³⁶ Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria [Updated October 2019], pp. 83-84, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation.

the law, tenants and property owners have to present ownership documents. Owners are then issued shares in line with the current estimated property value; there is little recourse to challenge estimates which are 'likely much lower than market value'.¹³⁷ The law gives property owners and relatives a month to appear with paperwork to reclaim their property, many of which had been left behind due to displacement; the law states that if property was not claimed by the deadline, it could be redeveloped, causing many displaced Syrian refugees and aid groups to state that the timelines could not be met, leading to loss of their property as a result.¹³⁸ The Austrian COI unit's country report on Syria stated that according to a confidential source, the law allows the expropriation of property belonging to refugees, because according to the aforementioned law, property, apartments and houses fall to the Syrian state if their owners cannot submit deeds of ownership to the corresponding newly installed authority.¹³⁹ In November 2018, the government extended the deadline to a year¹⁴⁰ and added amendments permitting appeal.¹⁴¹

According to SACD's 2019 report on the situation of returnees to government-held areas, the government's 'urban development 'laws'' in destroyed areas are discriminatory and returnees are 'systematically denied the right to their property in an openly retaliatory manner'.¹⁴² The Director of the Carnegie Middle East Centre wrote an article on this topic indicating that, in her analysis, Law No. 10 allows for additional vetting of returnees and puts refugees 'at risk of dispossession'. She noted that showing proof of property ownership to the government when a person is wanted for opposition activities would likely lead to imprisonment. Presenting proof of ownership 'will likely be impossible' for others such as those who fled their home region under duress without legal papers or deeds.¹⁴³

3.4 Utilities, hygiene and sanitation

Sources reported in 2019 that electricity¹⁴⁴ and cooking gas were being rationed in Damascus.¹⁴⁵ In April-May 2019, the country experienced a fuel crisis which also hit Damascus, that was blamed by state-affiliated media on international sanctions.¹⁴⁶ In a news report from December 2019 it was reported that under the smart card rationing system for gas introduced by the government, each family was eligible to receive one gas cylinder every 20 days, though the article noted discrepancies in prices and access whereby wealthy areas where government officials reside had stock and higher prices but other neighbourhoods experienced shortages and line ups. Costs of winter clothing, transportation, and food also reportedly increased due to the drop in the value of the Syrian Pound, according to a Syria Direct article from December 2019.¹⁴⁷ Another article by Syria Direct noted that in areas of Damascus retaken under government control, IDPs who returned were required to pay for their water and electricity bills for periods when they had fled their homes, even though these were

¹³⁷ CMEC, The Politics of Dispossession, 9 May 2018, [url](#)

¹³⁸ SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

¹³⁹ Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria [Updated October 2019], p. 75, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation.

¹⁴⁰ SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21; CMEC, The Politics of Dispossession, 9 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

¹⁴² SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁴³ CMEC, The Politics of Dispossession, 9 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴ Irish Times (The), Truffles and traffic jams: Damascus grinds on after eight years of war, 11 April 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct, Syrian government forces returning displaced persons to pay for services they never received, 16 September 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ Irish Times (The), Truffles and traffic jams: Damascus grinds on after eight years of war, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ Syria Direct, "No end in sight" A day in the life of a journalist during the Damascus fuel crisis, 9 May 2019, [url](#); Syria Direct, 'From one crisis to another': Gas queues and frustration as Damascus residents grapple with fuel shortages, 25 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷ Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

even cut off during the Syrian government's siege of the area; they also had to pay fees to restore access to water and electricity after returning.¹⁴⁸ Returnees to recaptured parts of Rural Damascus, Dar'a, Homs, and Aleppo were also asked to pay fees for water, electricity, phone, municipal and real estate taxes during a period during which they already had fled, as SADC reported in 2019.¹⁴⁹

According to the SCPR, in general terms, 'the Syrian population had difficulty in access to improved drinking water since the beginning of the conflict, in addition to rising costs for water'.¹⁵⁰ The DIS report from March 2019 about the socio-economic situation in Damascus City stated that there is a water supply network all over the Governorate of Damascus and that 80 to 90 % of the city is fully served with drinking water and sanitation; however in the slum areas of Damascus such as Yarmouk, Jobar, Barzeh, Al-Balad, Qaboun, Hajar Al-Aswad and al-Qadam, water supply infrastructure has been damaged from past military operations, in these areas trucks tend to provide water rather than piping. The report also noted that despite higher water reserves from rainfall, residents in Damascus City have experienced water shortages during the day, and that 'residents living in the outer areas of Damascus City experience more frequent water outages than residents living in more central and upscale neighbourhoods. When there is no water in the pipes, residents use water reservoirs on the roof or in their houses'.¹⁵¹

3.5 Health care

Attacks on healthcare

WHO reported that there were 83 attacks on health care in the period between 1 January and 30 November 2019; all of the attacks took place in the northern part of the country.¹⁵² According to sources cited in a DIS/DRC report, the general security situation in government-controlled areas, including in major cities like the capital 'improved significantly since May 2018' marked by decreases in military confrontations, and fewer security incidents such as shelling and direct fire.¹⁵³ Information on attacks on health care facilities in Damascus city itself were not found among sources consulted for this report.

Public healthcare facilities and capacity in Damascus

UNOCHA's humanitarian needs survey found that in Damascus governorate, there were 1 177 907 'people in need' of health-related humanitarian support. In Damascus, health and protection were the two sectors with the greatest number of people in need of humanitarian support across 10 sectors in the governorate.¹⁵⁴ The WHO's 2018 annual report on public hospitals in Syria provides a map of the distribution and functionality of public hospitals in Syria.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ Syria Direct, Syrian government forces returning displaced persons to pay for services they never received, 16 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁵⁰ SCPR, Food Security and Conflict in Syria, June 2019, [url](#), p. 54

¹⁵¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8; see also: Syrian Observer (The), Rise in Real Estate Prices in Cities in Syria, 6 March 2018, [url](#); Syrian Observer (The), Major Increase in House Rental Prices in Damascus Slums, 4 May 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵² UNOCHA, WoS, Syrian Arab Republic, Attacks on health care in Syria, 1 January – 30 November 2019, [url](#). Attack on health care is defined as any act of verbal or physical violence, threat of violence or other psychological violence, or obstruction that interferes with the availability, access and delivery of curative and/or preventive health services. For further information please visit webpage <https://www.who.int/emergencies/attacks-on-health-care/en/>

¹⁵³ Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁵⁴ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 32

¹⁵⁵ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 5

There are 15 public hospitals in Damascus, eight of which are affiliated with the Ministry of Health (MoH), and 7 with the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE).¹⁵⁶ WHO reported 14 Damascus hospitals functional and 1 hospital partially functional, as of the end of December 2018.¹⁵⁷ 12 public hospitals were defined as accessible (easy to access for patients and health staff) and 2 as hard-to-access (hard to reach, due to security situation or long distance). One of the hospitals in Damascus was partially damaged.¹⁵⁸ Electricity generators were reported as being available in the hospitals 24 hours/day as of 2018. Still, the number and/or efficiency of electricity generators was insufficient in 27 % of Damascus hospitals.¹⁵⁹ One hospital reported limited water sources.¹⁶⁰

Some Damascus hospitals have extended their operational capacity: while the original total inpatient capacity equals to 2 850 beds, the available number of beds is reported as 3 311 (116 %) as of December 2018; the highest of all governorates.¹⁶¹ The estimated caseload of functional public hospitals of Damascus (outpatient consultations and emergency cases) from January to December 2018 was over 1.5 million cases¹⁶²; the hospitals provided treatment to over 67 000 outpatients and approximately 13 700 inpatients in public hospitals. Damascus had the highest number of treated patients, followed by Aleppo (44 397), Latakia (44 397) and Homs (33 195).¹⁶³

Damascus had the highest proportion and availability of doctors in functional public hospitals, more than any other governorate: 2 182 male doctors and 1 263 female doctors, compared with the lowest proportions found in Raqqa (45 male and 9 female), Hasaka, Quneitra, and Deir Ez-Zor.¹⁶⁴ As of December 2018, the human resources of the public hospitals in Damascus included: no general practitioners, 44 orthopaedic surgeons, 61 general surgeons, 18 neurological surgeons, 835 other specialists, 17 emergency physicians, 2 434 resident doctors, 36 dentists, 3 667 nurses, 402 laboratory staff, 151 midwives, 81 pharmacists, 546 university staff, 1 214 technicians, and 3 030 other staff.

WHO reported that 52 out of the 61 public health centres (PHC) in Damascus were reported fully functional, 1 partially functional, and 8 non-functional as of the end of 2018.¹⁶⁵ In terms of accessibility to patients and staff in Damascus, 54 PHCs were reported accessible, 1 hard-to-reach, and 6 inaccessible.¹⁶⁶ Another 2 centres were reported damaged; for 5 there was no report.¹⁶⁷ Among functional PHCs (53), 45 centres were equipped with electricity generators and 40 centres had refrigerators for storing vaccines.¹⁶⁸ Nurses (354) were main staff in functioning Damascus PHCs, but human resources also included: 36 practitioners, 205 specialist doctors, 72 resident doctors, 97 dentists, 92 laboratory staff, 78 midwives, 7 pharmacists, and other technicians/staff.¹⁶⁹ The

¹⁵⁶ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵⁷ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁵⁸ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), pp. 8, 12

¹⁵⁹ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁶⁰ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁶¹ Based on Figure 12: WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁶² Based on Figure 29: WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 27

¹⁶³ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 29

¹⁶⁴ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), pp. 19-20, 25

¹⁶⁵ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁶⁶ Accessible was explained in the report as 'easily accessible' for patients and staff; hard-to-reach was due to security situation or long distance; inaccessible was not accessible due to security situation, or a centre is only accessible to a small fraction of people, or not open to civilians. WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁶⁷ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁶⁸ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁶⁹ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 18

estimated workload (2018) was more than 1.2 million consultations, compared to the higher numbers of 1.6 million in Rural Damascus, 1.4 million in Hama, 1.39 in Homs, and 1.33 in Aleppo.¹⁷⁰

Availability and access to treatment

Article 22 of the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic states that:

- ‘1. The state shall guarantee every citizen and his family in cases of emergency, sickness, disability, orphan-hood and old age;
2. The state shall protect the health of citizens and provide them with the means of prevention, treatment and medication’.¹⁷¹

According to the sources interviewed by DIS, every Syrian national can access public primary services and hospitals in Damascus free of charge or at a very low charge that is affordable for low-income groups; emergency care is also provided free of charge.¹⁷²

The nearest health care facility (either public or private) can be accessed in Damascus within an average five minutes of travel time, generally by car.¹⁷³ However, the health care facilities in the capital are reported to be overcrowded, particularly due to a high number of patients, including children, who come to Damascus for medical treatment from other provinces.¹⁷⁴ Non-Damascene patients constitute the large majority. According to an international organisation interviewed by Austria’s COI unit, ‘9 out of 10 patients in Damascus come from other provinces to receive health care. Due to the high demand, the health care system is overstretched. For example, relatives must help in caring for children in emergency care units because medical staff do not have sufficient resources and hospitals are overcrowded. The employee of an international organisation in Damascus reports that five children have to share a single bed in emergency childcare’.¹⁷⁵

The WHO stated in its 2018 report on PHCs in Syria that ‘constant deterioration of functionality status of public health centres was observed throughout 2018’ in the country.¹⁷⁶ The conflict and displacement put immense pressure on the Syrian health system resulting in shortages of medical specialists, medicines, and supplies.¹⁷⁷ Access to specialised care and medical supplies declined because of disrupted transport routes, the flight of health sector personnel and access restrictions for humanitarian aid’.¹⁷⁸ A range of medical services are offered by PHCs in Syria: general clinical services and essential trauma care, child health clinic, nutrition management, communicable disease diagnosis and treatment, sexually-transmitted diseases, maternal and newborn health, and mental healthcare; though a graphic on availability at all functional PHCs indicated that not all services were available, for instance with essential newborn care being in 15 % of PHCs, TB treatment in 32 %, psychosocial support in 34 %, and antenatal care in 81 %, though no governorate breakdown was given.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁰ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 24

¹⁷¹ Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012, ILO, [url](#)

¹⁷² Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁷³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 69

¹⁷⁴ Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria, May 2019 - Updated October 2019, p. 80, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation; Syria Untold, Queuing at the children’s hospital, [url](#), 16 December 2019

¹⁷⁵ Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria, May 2019 - Updated October 2019, p. 80, Available from BFA Staatendokumentation.

¹⁷⁶ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 51

¹⁷⁷ WHO, Annual Report 2018, World Health Organization, Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁸ SIM, Protecting Healthcare in Syria, August 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁷⁹ Based on Figure 27: WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January – December 2018, [url](#), p. 23

According to WHO, patients with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) receive the medical treatment at primary and secondary care levels, unless complications are developed.¹⁸⁰ Cancer is treated at secondary and tertiary levels only.¹⁸¹ Besides the insufficiency of specialised medical care, e.g. cancer treatment, dialysis, and treatment of thalassemia cases, the Syrian health sector lacks capacity to provide emergency and comprehensive health services for the treatment of trauma and burns as well as to perform surgeries and provide postoperative rehabilitation treatment across the country.¹⁸²

The quality of medical treatment in Damascus is affected by long waiting lists and the lack of well-trained doctors, as reported by the Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) of Mercy Corps, interviewed by DIS. WHO in Damascus and a humanitarian organisation in Syria, which were also interviewed by DIS, reported on shortages of equipment, medicines, and surgeries in tertiary health care and the treatment of cancer and cardiovascular diseases. Both sources reported on waiting lists to receive treatment at public hospitals and high prices at private hospitals.¹⁸³ Thus, WHO in Damascus reported that advanced surgery at a private hospital can cost up to 6 000 USD.¹⁸⁴ As reported by HAT, the cost of a full medical check-up at a private hospital is at least 120 USD and can be afforded by only 10 - 15 % of the inhabitants of Damascus.¹⁸⁵ A 2017 academic article mentioned that a tomography scan, which was available only in Damascus, requires self-payment.¹⁸⁶

In Syria, Damascus hospitals have the largest availability of services to treat NCDs, such as diabetes and diabetic complications, hypertension, cardiovascular, kidney, and cancer diseases. The city has two cardiovascular specialised hospitals.¹⁸⁷

The local media reports on the difficulties in getting appointments to see neurologists, particularly to treat children. One of the parents has reported paying 10 000 Syrian pounds (about 20 USD) for the examination at the Ibn al-Nafees Governmental Hospital, which specialises in the treatment of children with motor disabilities, and about 60 000 Syrian pounds (about 100 USD) for the medicines.¹⁸⁸

Sources report that there is a shortage of mental healthcare services in Syria, including psychiatrists.¹⁸⁹ However, WHO in Damascus told DIS that there are more psychiatrists in Damascus than in other parts of Syria; and treatment is provided free of charge in public clinics or through a number of NGOs that provide psycho-social support.¹⁹⁰ Displaced people were reported especially prone to being affected by mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁹¹

Availability of medication

The availability of pharmaceutical products as well as supplies of raw material and spare parts for medical equipment in the hospitals of Damascus has been negatively affected by the destruction of local pharmaceutical factories and sanctions imposed by the US and the EU.¹⁹² Pharmaceutical companies are forced to use third countries—Lebanon, the UAE, Iran, Russia, and China—to get

¹⁸⁰ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

¹⁸¹ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

¹⁸² UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 70

¹⁸³ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁸⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁸⁵ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁸⁶ Sahloul, E. et.al, Cancer Care at Times of Crisis and War: The Syrian Example, JGO (Journal of Global Oncology), 3(4): 338-345, August 2017, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷ WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2018, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 43

¹⁸⁸ Syria Untold, Queuing at the children's hospital, [url](#), 16 December 2019

¹⁸⁹ Syria Deeply, In Syria's War, 'Mental Health Is the Last Priority', 31 August 2017, [url](#); Denmark, DIS, Syria: The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁹⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁹¹ Karasapan, O, Syria's mental health crisis, Brookings, 25 April 2016, [url](#); Weissbecker, I, Lechner, A., Addressing Mental Health Needs among Syrian Refugees, Middle East Institute, 22 September 2015, [url](#)

¹⁹² Reuters, Syria sanctions indirectly hit children's cancer treatment, 15 March 2017, [url](#); Irish Times (the), Truffles and Traffic Jams: Damascus Grinds on After Eight Years of War, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

around sanctions’.¹⁹³ The shortage in supplies and long delivery times and difficulties with updating medical computer software were reported, for instance, in Mujtahed public hospital in Damascus, one of the largest healthcare facilities in the city.¹⁹⁴ Damascus’ Children Hospital, which provides cancer treatment to children, was also reported to encounter shortages in medicines and supplies.¹⁹⁵

In the annual report for 2018, WHO noted that ‘although public healthcare facilities were supposed to provide medicines free of charge, many patients [in Syria] were forced to buy them in private pharmacies because they were not available otherwise’.¹⁹⁶ According to WHO in Damascus, medicines which are ‘prescribed by primary healthcare physicians is available to a great extent in pharmacies’ and the price is ‘not high’. Medicines to treat chronic diseases are ‘provided free of charge by public healthcare clinics and hospitals’.¹⁹⁷ An international humanitarian organisation in Damascus has similarly reported that medicine to treat primary health care patients is not expensive. Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) clinics in Damascus provide medicine to treat primary care patients free of charge. However, the source has mentioned reports on IDPs in Damascus, ‘who have not been able to afford basic medicines for primary care’.¹⁹⁸

3.6 Education for children

General overview

Article 29 of the the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic stipulates that education is ‘a right guaranteed by the state, and it is free at all levels’ and that it ‘shall be compulsory until the end of basic education state’.¹⁹⁹

According to the data of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2004), the literacy rate of adults in Syria (15 years and older) was estimated at around 81 % (88 % for men and 74 % for women) while the literacy rate of the youth (15 – 24 years) was around 92 % (95 % for men and 90 % for women).²⁰⁰

Education is mandatory up to the 9th grade (between the ages of 6 and 15), which comprises 6 years of primary school and 3 years of lower level secondary school. After receiving the Basic Education Certificate, students can pursue secondary education at the upper level or enter vocational schools.²⁰¹

The conflict caused a decline in access to education.²⁰² UNOCHA reported on the increase in the number of children engaged in child labour and child marriage, due to dropping out of school.²⁰³ Expected years of schooling dropped from 11.8 in 2010 to 8.9 in 2017 and 2018; the number of mean years of schooling decreased from 6.3 in 2010 to 5.1 in 2015 – 2018.²⁰⁴ The Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI) 2018 Country Report pointed out that ‘a difficulty for Syria in the future will be the “lost generation” – millions of Syrian children are currently hardly or not at all able to go to school, both

¹⁹³ International Crisis Group, Ways out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum, Middle East Report № 209, 25 November 2019, [url](#), p. 5. The description was given by a Damascene pharmacist.

¹⁹⁴ Los Angeles Times, For many Syrians, ‘smart’ sanctions are anything but, 24 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ Reuters, Syria sanctions indirectly hit children’s cancer treatment, 15 March 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹⁶ WHO, Annual Report 2018, World Health Organization – Syrian Arab Republic, 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁹⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7, 12

¹⁹⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 7, 17

¹⁹⁹ Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012, ILO, [url](#)

²⁰⁰ UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Syrian Arab Republic, [url](#)

²⁰¹ Nuffic, Education System, Syria, Described and compared with the Dutch system, updated 2 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7 Nuffic is the Dutch organisation for internalisation in education, for the details see [url](#)

²⁰² UN Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry of the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/31/68, [url](#), p. 11

²⁰³ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 13, 26

²⁰⁴ UNDP, Human Development Report 2019: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century, Briefing note for countries on the 2019 Human Development Report, Syrian Arab Republic, [url](#), p. 3

inside and outside Syria'.²⁰⁵ UNOCHA provided the following breakdown of education-related humanitarian needs in March 2019 across Syria, including in Damascus, noting that 2.5 million children are out of school across Syria²⁰⁶:

GOVERNOR- ATE	SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (5-17 YEARS)			TEACHERS			TOTAL		
	Children in need Total	Children in need Boys	Children in need Girls	Teachers in need Total	Teachers in need Males	Teachers in need Females	Total (children and teachers)	Males (children and teachers)	Females (children and teachers)
Aleppo	1,304,139	681,078	623,064	27,170	14,189	12,980	1,331,308	695,267	636,044
Al-Hasakeh	315,124	165,643	149,480	6,565	3,451	3,114	321,689	169,094	152,594
Ar-Raqqa	235,508	117,233	118,275	4,906	2,442	2,464	240,414	119,675	120,739
As-Sweida	87,005	53,404	33,601	1,813	1,113	700	88,818	54,517	34,301
Damascus	474,270	221,181	253,089	9,881	4,608	5,273	484,151	225,789	258,362
Dar'a	258,520	142,078	116,443	5,386	2,960	2,426	263,906	145,037	118,869
Deir-ez-Zor	235,912	138,817	97,096	4,915	2,892	2,023	240,827	141,709	99,119
Hama	490,394	281,390	209,005	10,217	5,862	4,354	500,611	287,252	213,360
Homs	274,301	153,657	120,644	5,715	3,201	2,513	280,016	156,859	123,157
Idleb	853,292	455,607	397,681	17,777	9,492	8,285	871,069	465,098	405,966
Lattakia	322,917	173,448	149,469	6,727	3,614	3,114	329,645	177,062	152,583
Quneitra	29,280	15,719	13,561	610	327	283	29,890	16,047	13,844
Rural Damascus	748,733	402,429	346,304	15,599	8,384	7,215	764,332	410,813	353,519
Tartous	225,257	115,256	110,002	4,693	2,401	2,292	229,950	117,657	112,293
Grand Total	5,854,654	3,116,940	2,737,714	121,972	64,936	57,036	5,976,626	3,181,876	2,794,749

Figure 5: UNOCHA, People in need in the education sector²⁰⁷

Attacks on schools in Damascus (2013 – 2016)

Information and reporting on attacks on schools in Damascus since 2016 could not be found among the sources consulted for this report, however there have been examples in past years in the conflict. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack lists a number of documented attacks on schools, schoolchildren, teachers, and personnel in Damascus, which took place from 2013 to 2016.²⁰⁸ In February 2013, a car bomb exploded near Ibn-Atheer School in Mazraa district, close to the Russian embassy, killing 50 people, including children.²⁰⁹ In November 2013, mortar rounds hit schools in the districts of Al-Dweila, Bab Sharqi, and Al-Qassa, killing children and school personnel.²¹⁰ In April 2014, mortar shells hit the Badr el-Din Hussaini educational complex in the Al-Shaghour neighbourhood of Damascus, reportedly killing 17 children²¹¹; in May 2015, a mortar shell killed one female teacher and injured more than twenty students at Al-Thaqafi primary school in the capital's Al-Maleki neighbourhood.²¹² In September 2016, 'it was reported that the UNRWA Al-Jarmaq School in Yarmouk

²⁰⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2018 Country Report, Syria, 2018, [url](#), p. 41

²⁰⁶ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 63

²⁰⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 63

²⁰⁸ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, Education under Attack 2018 – Syria, 11 May 2018, [url](#)

²⁰⁹ Telegraph (The), Syria: Bomb kills 50 as children leave school in Damascus, 21 February 2013, [url](#)

²¹⁰ UN Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, S/2014/31, January 27, 2014, [url](#), p. 11

²¹¹ HRW, World Report 2015: Syria, Events of 2014, [url](#)

²¹² AP, Shell kills teacher, wounds 23 students in Damascus school, 20 May 2015, [url](#)

had been seized by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and that the premises were being used to deliver education by armed actors'.²¹³

Schools and school enrolment in Damascus

According to the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, reporting in 2016, there were 518 schools in Damascus: 399 of them being public, 96 private schools and 23 schools run by UNRWA.²¹⁴ There were 212 295 (103 915 girls and 108 380 boys) students receiving the 1st cycle (1 – 4 grades) education in 2016—the last year for which the statistics were made public. There were 181 680 students (92 703 boys and 88 977 girls) attending public schools, 23 842 (12 186 boys and 11 656 girls) studying in private schools, and 6 773 (3 491 boys and 3 282 girls) registered as students in UNRWA-run schools.²¹⁵ In addition, 613 students (511 women and 102 men) were enrolled in 37 anti-illiteracy classes in Damascus in 2016.²¹⁶

With almost 95 % of school-age population enrolled in schools, Damascus has the highest enrolment rate among the Syrian governorates, according to 2018 estimates of the World Bank.²¹⁷ Differently from other governorates, Damascus displays the largest difference in enrolment by gender: a 6-percentage point difference, in favour of girls, according to the data of Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) for 2018.²¹⁸

UNOCHA estimates the number of school-age children (5 – 17 years) in need in Damascus at 474 270 (221 181 boys and 253 089 girls); the number of teachers in need is 9 881 (4 608 male and 5 273 female teachers).²¹⁹ Due to the economic situation and low salaries, teachers in Damascus often have a second job or have to leave the profession altogether.²²⁰ According to a 2018 study conducted among students in Damascus capital area and Latakia, 'Syrian children are experiencing traumatic events and war-associated daily stresses that are hugely impacting psychological well-being'.²²¹

Access to schooling

The Government of Syria is the main provider of education in most areas of Syria, with the support of international NGOs and UN agencies in some areas. It has the responsibility for education services in the following governorates: Quneitra, Dar'a, Suweida, Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Hama, Tartous, Latakia, parts of Aleppo, parts of Deir Ez-Zor, and parts of Hasaka. In some areas of the northeast of Syria, the 'self-administration' provides most education, such as in Raqqa and parts of Deir-ez Zor, Aleppo, and Hasaka.²²² Schools providing primary and secondary education, including UNWRA and private schools are under the supervision of the Syrian Ministry of Education. Public

²¹³ UNSC, Implementation of Security Council resolutions, 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015), Report of the Secretary General, S/2016/873, [url](#), p. 4. The UN Security Council report specifies that 'UNRWA has not been in a position to operate any of its 29 schools, including the Al-Jarmaq School in Yarmuk, since December 2012' and was not able to confirm or deny the reports about the Al-Jarmaq School.

²¹⁴ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Yearbook 2017, Number of Basic Education Schools (1st & 2nd Cycle) by Ownership of School & Sex of Pupils & Distribution of Schools by Governorates in 2016, [url](#)

²¹⁵ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Yearbook 2017, Number of Pupils of Basic Education (1st Cycle) by School Ownership & Sex 2012-2016 & Distribution of Schools by Governorates in 2016, [url](#). For the statistics for the 2nd cycle, see [url](#)

²¹⁶ Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Yearbook 2017, Anti-Illiteracy Classes, Enrolled & their Graduates by Sex 2012 – 2016 & Their Distribution by Governorates in 2016, [url](#)

²¹⁷ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 132. The estimates rely on UNICEF estimates for 2016/2017.

²¹⁸ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 131

²¹⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 63

²²⁰ Syria Untold, Teachers, students live with burden of war and dire economic conditions in Damascus, 5 December 2019, [url](#)

²²¹ Perkins, J. D. et. al, Mental health in Syrian children with a focus on post-traumatic stress: a cross-sectional study from Syrian schools, Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 53, 1231-1239(2018), 6 August 2018, [url](#)

²²² Steele, J., UNESCO, Internally Displaced People and Education in Syria, 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13

primary and secondary education is free.²²³ A humanitarian organisation interviewed by DIS reported that ‘no child is denied access based on his or her area of origin or ethnic background’. Public schools are free and the Syrian government encourages parents to enrol their children in schools via media campaigns.²²⁴

According to a 2016 paper on the Syrian education system in the midst of the conflict, published by the Vienna Institute of Demography, in government-controlled areas of Syria, the provision of education is ‘more stable’ than in the areas held by the opposition.²²⁵ However the ‘relative stability’ attracts more students, which results in overcrowded classrooms, particularly in basic education. To accommodate the students, the majority of schools that provide basic education have started implementing double shifts.²²⁶ This point was also made by a humanitarian organisation interviewed by DIS on the situation in Damascus in 2019: ‘Damascus schools are overcrowded and many of them operate in two shifts ‘in order to cope with the lack of capacity and the growing demand’.²²⁷

Private schools ‘are regulated under the same educational law as public schools’.²²⁸ In the worsening economic situation, public schools started to be preferred ‘to secure other basic life needs’.²²⁹ According to sources published in local media, the cost of schooling in private schools starts at 350 000 SYP [about 1 600 EUR] for one semester and may reach or even exceed 500 000 SYP [about 2 300 EUR], which makes private school unaffordable for most Damascus inhabitants.²³⁰

IDPs and returnees

According to the Humanitarian Access Team (HAT), which was interviewed by DIS, children who return to the city after a period of absence are allowed to enrol in schools and are placed at the level that corresponds to their skills after certifying their latest school attendance or taking a placement test.²³¹ A humanitarian organisation, similarly interviewed by DIS, mentioned that a high number of children of IDPs study in schools in areas surrounding Damascus, which causes overcrowding of the schools.²³²

The media source Syria Untold reported that children from displaced families encountered discrimination from peers and teachers due to ‘class disparities’ emerging ‘between host and displaced communities’.²³³

UNRWA

In the 2018/2019 school year, ‘UNRWA provided basic education from grades 1 – 9 to approximately 48 800 Palestine refugee students in 103 UNRWA schools located in Damascus, Rif Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, and Der’a’. The 20 UNRWA-run schools in Ein el-Tal, Yarmouk and Dar’a require major construction, maintenance and rehabilitation works.²³⁴ A number of UNRWA schools operate on a

²²³ Nuffic, Education System, Syria, Described and compared with the Dutch system, updated 2 September 2019, [url](#), p.7. Nuffic is the Dutch organisation for internalisation in education, for the details see [url](#)

²²⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

²²⁵ Hessian (al), M. et. al, Understanding the Syrian Educational System in a Context of Crisis?, Working papers, Vienna Institute of Demography, September 2016, [url](#), p. 28

²²⁶ Hessian (al), M. et. al, Understanding the Syrian Educational System in a Context of Crisis?, Working papers, Vienna Institute of Demography, September 2016, [url](#), p. 28

²²⁷ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

²²⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²²⁹ Zaman al-Wasl, Syria’s private schools reveal increase in class gap, 1 October 2017 [url](#)

²³⁰ Syrian Observer (The), Syria’s Private Schools: a Way to Get Rich Quick, 23 September 2016, [url](#); see also Zaman al-Wasl, Syria’s private schools reveal increase in class gap, 1 October 2017, [url](#)

²³¹ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

²³² Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 19

²³³ Syria Untold, Teachers, students live with burden of war and dire economic conditions in Damascus, 5 December 2019, [url](#)

²³⁴ UNRWA, Education in Syria, 2019, [url](#)

double shift basis and the organisation aims to employ around 1 700 teachers, including teachers paid on a daily basis, to fulfil the need for teachers.²³⁵

3.7 Means of basic subsistence and employment

The Syrian economy faces significant difficulties in providing Syrians with job opportunities.²³⁶ The World Bank estimates that in the government-controlled regions approximately 2.4 million net jobs were lost from 2010 to 2015. Construction and industry are the sectors that suffered the greatest loss, followed by agriculture.²³⁷ Since the outbreak of the war, the SYP has experienced massive depreciation, which negatively affected national consumption.²³⁸ In circumstances of the war economy, many Syrians have entered the informal employment sector²³⁹ and the figures for child labour have significantly increased.²⁴⁰

According to the multidimensional poverty index published by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Damascus is one of the least deprived Syrian governorates, similarly to Suweida, Tartous, and Latakia.²⁴¹ Some economic activities in the capital were re-established since the stabilisation of the security situation.²⁴² The World Bank stated in its 2020 report that poverty in Syria prevails everywhere, noting that ‘Syrians have better access to livelihood opportunities in countries of asylum than in Syria’.²⁴³

Unemployment

The World Bank reported that the conflict caused lower employment and high unemployment in ‘high-conflict-intensity areas’ due to concerns for security over the economy.²⁴⁴ CIA World Factbook estimated the unemployment rate in the country at 50 % as of 2017.²⁴⁵ FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) and WFP (World Food Programme) carried out a crop and food security assessment mission to Syria in summer 2019; in that report, for 2018-2019, unemployment was identified as the ‘main challenge expressed by mVAM respondents’ in all 12 governorates; women were particularly concerned about the lack of job opportunities and the need to enter the workforce to support their families.²⁴⁶ According to the data of the World Bank, the unemployment rate in Syria has increased from 22 % to 41 % for females and from 43 % to 84 % for female youth (15-24 years old) in the period from 2010 to 2017, compared to the increase from 6 % to 11 % for male and from 16 % to 27 % for male youth.²⁴⁷

²³⁵ UNRWA, 2019 Syria Regional Crisis, Emergency Appeal, 29 January 2019, [url](#), p. 11

²³⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2018 Country Report — Syria, 2018, [url](#), p. 22; World Bank, The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 2017, [url](#), p. 68

²³⁷ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 85

²³⁸ Daher, J., Syria’s manufacturing sector: the model of economic recovery in question, European University Institute, 2019, [url](#)

²³⁹ Syrian Economic Sciences Society and UNDP (UN Development Programme), Employment and Livelihood Support in Syria, July 2018, [url](#), p. 54

²⁴⁰ Syrian Economic Sciences Society and UNDP, Employment and Livelihood Support in Syria, July 2018, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴¹ The multidimensional poverty index has three dimensions: health (determined by infant mortality and nutrition indicators), education (determined by years of school and school attendance of children), standard of living (determined by six indicators: electricity, drinking water, sanitation, land, cooking fuel, assets). Syrian Economic Sciences Society; UNDP (UN Development Programme), Employment and Livelihood Support in Syria, July 2018, [url](#), p. 44

²⁴² UNESCWA (UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia); University of St Andrews, Syria at War, Five Years on, 2016, [url](#), p. 15

²⁴³ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 11

²⁴⁴ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 86

²⁴⁵ US, CIA (US Central Intelligence Agency), The World Factbook, updated 5 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁶ The study was based on mVAM (Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping) survey and was conducted in 12 Syrian governorates. FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations); WFP (World Food Programme), FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, Special Report, 5 September 2019, [url](#), p. 61

²⁴⁷ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 86

Employment

In 2018, the governorate of Damascus provided approximately 15 % of the total employment in Syria, according to 2018 HNAP data²⁴⁸ Livelihoods in Damascus are predominately based ‘around business trading jobs, government office job, commercial activities, petty trading and remittances’.²⁴⁹

A humanitarian organisation in Syria, interviewed by DIS in March 2019, has mentioned that the capacity of the labour market in Damascus is smaller than the demand for jobs, particularly due to a high number of IDPs. University graduates in Damascus are reported to be mostly able to find an employment, even if not in their field of study. Moreover, some space for a new workforce has opened because a large number of skilled labour has left the country during the conflict. According to a humanitarian organisation in Syria, unskilled workers can ‘find a job in the city and manage a minimum standard of living’, particularly if they received some vocational training. The source however added that ‘it is still possible for unskilled people to find jobs such as porter in the market, taxi driver etc. The source stated, however, that expenses are high in Damascus City and it is very difficult for low- and middle income groups to make ends meet’.²⁵⁰ In Damascus and other areas with a lower incidence of conflict, the participation of women in the economy has increased.²⁵¹ An increasing number of women find employment in traditionally male jobs.²⁵² IDP women are also reported to take part in employment increasingly due to the shortage of male workers caused by the conflict.²⁵³

For more information on the situation of women see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#)

Holding a job does not guarantee a person’s ability to acquire a livelihood²⁵⁴, due to inflation and the collapse of the SYP.²⁵⁵ The instability of the Syrian currency affects factories and enterprises— and particularly, smaller businesses—which are reported to have been forced to stop production and possibly lay off workers.²⁵⁶

Average salaries/wages

According to news website Asharq al-Awsat, the salaries of government employees were between 30 000 [52 EUR] and 40 000 SYP [about 69 EUR] as of mid-2019, while the average salary of employees in the private sector did not exceed 65 000 [about 113 EUR].²⁵⁷ The data of the Central Bureau of Statistics for 2018 reported that the highest civil servant salary in governmental institutions was 100 000 SYP [about 166 EUR] per month, while, according to a February 2019 article the estimate for the average monthly household expenditure was about 325 000 SYP [592 EUR].²⁵⁸

²⁴⁸ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ WoS, Food Security Sector, Expanded version of the Food Security Sector, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018, November 2017, [url](#), p. 17. Humanitarian response in Syria is delivered through the coordinated Whole of Syria (WoS) approach, which combines operations within Syria and cross border operations from Turkey and Iraq under UN Resolution 2449 (2018), delivering assistance from humanitarian organisations, NGOs and UN agencies. UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 43; UNOCHA provides an overarching framework for humanitarian planning in collaboration with humanitarian actors. For information see UNOCHA, 2015 Syria Response Plan, December 2014, [url](#), p. 2

²⁵⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria –The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 21

²⁵¹ World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2019, [url](#), p. 86

²⁵² World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2019, [url](#), p. 86; Denmark, DIS, Syria: The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 21; FT, Shortage of men sees more Syrian women enter workforce, 25 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁵³ FT, Shortage of men sees more Syrian women enter workforce, 25 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 21

²⁵⁵ Asharq al-Awsat, Damascus: Poverty Rising Prompts Calls for Salary Increase, 31 July 2019, [url](#); Xinhua News Agency, Spotlight: Syria faces growing economic hardships with skyrocketing prices, currency devaluation, 30 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁶ Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁷ Asharq al-Awsat, Damascus: Poverty Rising Prompts Calls for Salary Increase, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁸ Syrian Observer (The), Economic Hardships Push Syrian Families to the Edge, 26 February 2019, [url](#)

In April 2019, the Irish Times reported that civil servants earning 40-200 USD per month had difficulty covering expenses.²⁵⁹ A presidential decree of 21 November 2019 ordered an increase of 20 000 SYP [about 34 EUR] per month for salaries and wages for civilian and military employees.²⁶⁰ This increase in salaries reportedly did not alleviate the costs of daily living, according to residents of Damascus cited by Syria Direct. The same article reported the general increase in the costs of basic food commodities since October 2019.²⁶¹

Poverty

National poverty prevalence rates have increased between 2010 to 2017, and more steeply after 2012. Damascus city's poverty rate is reflective of the national average: poverty was at about 23 % in 2010, and increased to nearly 60 % in 2012, and about 90 % in 2016 and 2017 (93.7 % nationally), the latter years also being similar to rates in all other governorates of Syria, with the highest rates being over 90 % in Idlib, Hasaka, Tartous and Raqqa.²⁶² According to Abdin's 2019 paper on community security in Damascus, poverty rates in Damascus are higher in the suburban areas surrounding the central districts; mainly in the eastern periphery coinciding with the main locations of informal settlements and rural districts.²⁶³

There is still a presence of middle class and wealthy Damascenes in the city.²⁶⁴ According to a December 2019 article, living costs and prices, including in Damascus city, reportedly increased due to the decline in value of the Syrian pound, increasing the difficulty of meeting basic needs.²⁶⁵

Sources reported that secondary or multiple employment is often required to meet needs.²⁶⁶ Requesting support from charitable organisations²⁶⁷ or reliance on aid from relatives abroad were other livelihood strategies.²⁶⁸ Rises in unemployment have been compounded by the decline in purchasing power to one tenth of pre-crisis level (if compared to the income in 2010).²⁶⁹ According to the March 2019 DIS report on Damascus City, the capacity of the labour market cannot absorb the demand in Damascus due to the influx of IDPs.²⁷⁰ Similarly, Yassar Abdin wrote in 2019 that although commodities are widely available from both local and imported sources across various district markets in Damascus, the 'vast majority' of the population cannot afford the high prices.²⁷¹

²⁵⁹ Irish Times (The), Truffles and traffic jams: Damascus grinds on after eight years of war, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ Enab Baladi, The unknown future of the Syrian pound between inflation and depreciation, 29 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁶¹ Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁶² SCPR, Food Security and Conflict in Syria, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 8, 50 (Summary of information in Fig 23).

²⁶³ Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 919 and graphic on p. 921

²⁶⁴ Irish Times (The), Truffles and traffic jams: Damascus grinds on after eight years of war, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁵ Syria Direct, Residents of Damascus suffer under rising prices and economic slowdown, 8 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁶ Abdin, Y., The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, International Review of the Red Cross IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 913; Irish Times (The), Truffles and traffic jams: Damascus grinds on after eight years of war, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁷ Abdin, Y., The fragility of community security in Damascus and its environs, International Review of the Red Cross Volume 99, Issue 906, [url](#), p. 913

²⁶⁸ Irish Times (The), Truffles and traffic jams: Damascus grinds on after eight years of war, 11 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 65

²⁷⁰ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁷¹ Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 913

4. Support to specific groups

4.1 Orphans

According to an article, published in Gulf News in 2016, there was an increase in homeless people in Damascus city as a result of people moving to the city mainly from Ghouta or the south due to the conflict since 2011.²⁷² Syria's minister for Social Affairs and Labour stated in the local news source Al-Watan [reported in Xinhua News] in 2018 that there were 30 000 orphans registered in the capital and surrounding areas; and claimed that there were '600 care centers for orphans in Damascus' and its surroundings.²⁷³

Sources reported that orphanages struggle with the capacity to deal with the need.²⁷⁴ Unaccompanied children in the orphanages frequently have no identification or have been separated from their families during the conflict.²⁷⁵ Frequently, it is police or extended family who drop children without papers or families at the orphanages.²⁷⁶

SOS Children's villages reportedly ran two centres for orphaned children in rural Damascus as of sources in 2016, housing 250 children.²⁷⁷ In October 2017, SOS Children's Villages opened a facility 16 km southwest of the city centre to house 80 children who have lost their parents.²⁷⁸

4.2 Trafficking victims and sexual/gender-based violence victims

According to a UNFPA report from 2019 about the situation of gender-based violence (GBV) in Syria, in Damascus Governorate, sexual, physical, domestic violence and honour killings are types of GBV that have been experienced by girls, widows, divorcees, and women in general in that governorate.²⁷⁹ EuroMedRights²⁸⁰ produced a 2017 factsheet on violence against women which stated that there are three shelters/safe houses for GBV in Syria, all of which are located in Damascus. These shelters receive people from all over Syria and women/girls are frequently referred by churches or juvenile judges:

- 'The Good Shepherd shelter (Al-Rahi Al-Saleh) which is run and funded by the Good Shepherd Sisters of Syria. It has a hotline, the only one operating in Syria (Trust Hotline)
- The Charity shelter which is run by the Sisters of Charity and co-funded in partnership with the UNHCR in Damascus
- The Oasis of Hope shelter which is run by the National Association for Women's Role Development (AWRD) and funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs'.²⁸¹

²⁷² Gulf News, The homeless of Damascus, 21 October 2016, [url](#)

²⁷³ Xinhua News Agency, 30,000 orphans registered in Damascus area: report, 16 December 2018, [url](#)

²⁷⁴ AW, The lost children of Syria's war, 5 February 2016, [url](#); TRT World, Orphanages struggle to provide refuge for Syrian war orphans, 16 January 2017, [url](#); Ayyam [Republished by the Syrian Observer], 27 August 2018, Orphanages in Syria Are Operating at and over Capacity, [url](#)

²⁷⁵ AW, The lost children of Syria's war, 5 February 2016, [url](#)

²⁷⁶ AW, The lost children of Syria's war, 5 February 2016, [url](#)

²⁷⁷ AW, The lost children of Syria's war, 5 February 2016, [url](#)

²⁷⁸ SOS Children's Villages, New SOS Children's Village in Damascus, 30 October 2017, [url](#)

²⁷⁹ UNFPA/WoS, Voices from Syria 2019 – Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview – Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility, 2019, [url](#), p. 61

²⁸⁰ EuroMed Rights is a civil society organisation that promotes human rights in the Euro-Mediterranean region through partnerships with NGOs and civil society. EuroMedRights, About Us, n.d., [url](#)

²⁸¹ EuroMedRights, Syria – Situation Report on Violence Against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 5

The same source reported that the shelters have space for about 40-45 women, which is insufficient for the need.²⁸² In 2019, UNFPA wrote that overcrowding in shelters, at home, and in the streets increased risks of GBV.²⁸³ In the case where ‘the government is the perpetrator, the issue is not tackled because of its sensitivity and fear of retaliation’, while the law cannot protect women from being sent home to their families where they may ‘be at risk of an honor killing’, according to EuroMedRights.²⁸⁴

Numerous centres provide psychological counselling and support such as the Red Crescent, Good Shepherd Sisters, and Syrian Family Planning Association.²⁸⁵ According to the human rights organisations mentioned in USDOS’ 2018 report, there were ‘no known government run-services for women’ fearing domestic violence outside Damascus but programming was offered through NGOs locally, though without reliable funding.²⁸⁶

For more information on the situation of women see the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Situation of women \(February 2020\)](#)

4.3 People with disabilities

Under the law, people with disabilities are protected from discrimination and have rights to access to education, employment, health and state services, though USDOS wrote that the government ‘did not enforce these provisions effectively’ and the disabled IDP population was described by a humanitarian NGO as ‘among the most hidden, neglected, and socially excluded of all displaced persons’ in Syria.²⁸⁷ The DIS report from March 2019 about the socio-economic situation in Damascus stated that access to services and facilities for people with disabilities are available in the city, ‘but the access is limited and the services cannot meet the demand of the high number of people with disabilities across Syria who travel to Damascus to receive such services’. There are organisations such as the Syrian Red Crescent, Amal, and UNDP, which provide services to persons with disabilities. WHO stated that ‘every disabled person that reaches the centres will receive treatment free of charge regardless of his or her religious or ethnic background’. There are a few specialised NGOs providing services for persons with autism.²⁸⁸ In October 2019, SOS Children’s Villages opened a small group home for children with special needs in Rural Damascus with spaces for 15 children who have severe mental and psychological disabilities.²⁸⁹

²⁸² EuroMedRights, Syria – Situation Report on Violence Against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 5

²⁸³ UNFPA/WoS, Voices from Syria 2019 – Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview – Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility, 2019, [url](#), p. 61

²⁸⁴ EuroMedRights, Syria – Situation Report on Violence Against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 5

²⁸⁵ EuroMedRights, Syria – Situation Report on Violence Against Women, November 2017, [url](#), p. 5

²⁸⁶ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 58-59

²⁸⁷ USDOS, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 – Syria, 13 March 2019, [url](#), p. 64

²⁸⁸ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 10

²⁸⁹ SOS Children’s Villages, A new small group home for children with special needs in Syria, 3 December 2019, [url](#)

5. Networks of support

According to confidential sources quoted by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in their July 2019 report on Syria, it is important for returnees to go back to their area of origin where they can rely on their social network and tribe; those returning from abroad lack such a safety net if they go to an area where they do not originate from.²⁹⁰

According to a 2018 article on socio-economic divisions in Syria exacerbated by the war, finding employment in Damascus was reported to be ‘increasingly difficult without wasta – nepotism or clout’.²⁹¹

Sources interviewed by DIS for its March 2019 report on Damascus City stated that single women have the same legal rights as men, however it is culturally more difficult for them to secure those rights. Furthermore, the DIS interviewed Mercy Corps who stated that ‘women have access to the labour market and they are able to rent housing for themselves and their families’ and one in three households relies on women to secure their livelihood; the main challenge in Damascus is the cost of rent, said one humanitarian organisation.²⁹²

Families who have difficulty meeting costs ‘would usually be referred to local NGOs to receive support’, which may consist of vocational training, food rations, or material assistance like winter clothing. A humanitarian organisation told DIS/DRC that ‘many such families depend on food support from NGOs or SARC, even in female-headed families, where the woman already has a job, as the income is often not sufficient to cover all expenses of the family. In practice the allocated food rations are barely sufficient for families and sometimes the parents have to give their share of the food to the children in order to feed them sufficiently. The support provided by local NGOs and SARC has been diminishing recently due to lack of resources and many organizations have started reviewing their targeting criteria, so the aid is channelled toward the neediest groups’.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation, (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 89

²⁹¹ MEI, Syria’s war economy exacerbates divide between rich and poor, 6 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁹² Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 9

²⁹³ Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, March 2019, [url](#), p. 9

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Annex 2: Terms of Reference

This report should focus on the capital, Damascus. The report should address the following key socio-economic indicators: housing, food security, water and sanitation, health care, education, livelihood opportunities such as employment, including the situation of returnees and other vulnerable groups. Internal mobility issues relating to accessibility (travel and admittance) are also to be included.

- ☐ City overview
 - Demographics, ethno-religious composition
 - Humanitarian situation and assistance
 - Displacement and return
- ☐ Internal mobility
 - Airports and flights connections
 - Freedom of movement, including impact of ethnic/religious background, place of origin, age, (perceived) affiliation with opposition groups and being on wanted lists
 - Documents
 - Travel by road and through checkpoints
- ☐ Economic overview
 - Impact of economic sanctions
- ☐ Employment
- ☐ Poverty
- ☐ Food security
- ☐ Housing, water, and sanitation
- ☐ Health care
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Coping mechanisms
 - Support for specific groups (orphans, victims of trafficking, victims of SGBV)
 - Family and community networks of support

