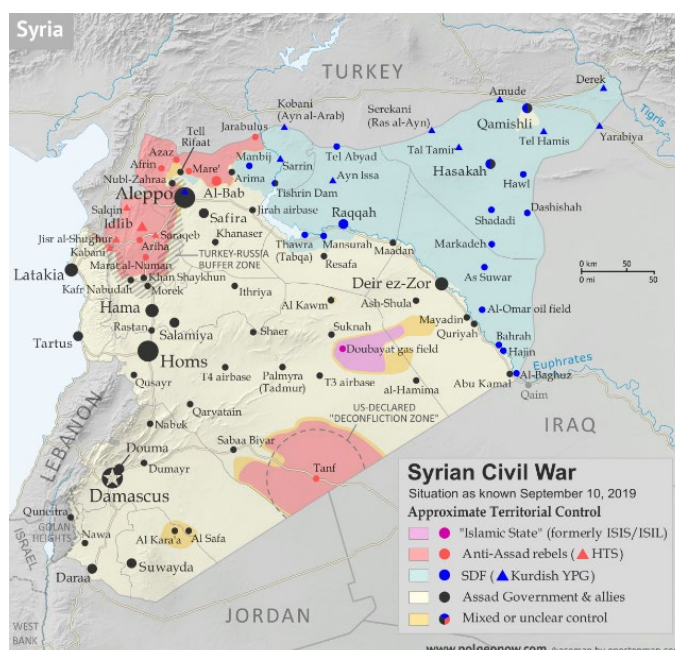


Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1108
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Udlændingestyrelsen
Titel:	Access to Damascus province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas
Udgivet:	September 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	1. januar 2020

Syria

Access to Damascus Province for Individuals from Former Rebel-held Areas



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

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Immigration Service

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September 2019

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Disclaimer

This brief report is written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.¹ The report is based on approved minutes from Skype meetings with carefully selected sources in the UK, Washington D.C. (USA) and Beirut (Lebanon). Statements from sources are used in the report and all statements are referenced.

This report is not and does not purport to be a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed in the report. It should be weighed against other available country of origin information on Syria.

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

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

¹ European Union, EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

Introduction and methodology

The Syrian-uprising that broke out in the spring of 2011, in the wake of the Arab spring, quickly developed into a civil war. The protest movements that fuelled the uprising gained a foothold in many villages and a number of suburbs in Syria's cities and urban areas. This was particularly the case for lower income urban areas dominated by Sunni Muslim populations. As a result several areas in Syria became occupied by numerous rebel groups and remained outside of the control of the Syrian Government for a number of years.²

With the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, the odds changed in favour of the Syrian government, which was able to retake several areas previously controlled by opposition forces. In 2016 the Syrian government was able to regain control over rebel-held East Aleppo. In the spring and summer of 2018 the Syrian government was able to retake all former rebel-held areas in both Damascus and Rural Damascus Province as well as Daraa province in southern Syria, thus solidifying its control of central and southern Syria that remains in place as of September 2019.³

This brief report is a follow-up on the issue of control and examination procedures at checkpoints at the entrances to Damascus Province. This issue was previously addressed in a joint fact finding report by DIS and DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, published in February 2019.⁴ In that report, it was noted that "people originating from former opposition-held areas and people who resided in such areas are subject to scrutiny or problems when approaching checkpoints".⁵ For a further elaboration on the kind of scrutiny an individual could face, please see the DIS and DRC report from February 2019.⁶

The report at hand focuses on factors which could potentially cause scrutiny and problems for individuals from former rebel-held areas intending to enter Damascus Province. In this regard, the report will among other things look into the significance of the individual's place of stay and his/her place of origin/registration, opposition groups that formerly controlled the area, and when the government retook control over the area.

This report limits its geographical examination to Damascus Province as outlined by UN-OCHA⁷. Yarmouk is a part of Damascus province (the province that was the focus of the fact finding report of February 2019). Yarmouk is excluded from this examination, as the Syrian government has limited entrance to this area.⁸

² Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Sikkerhetssituasjonen*, 30. August 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-9; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

³ Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Sikkerhetssituasjonen*, 30. August 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-9; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

⁴ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [Url](#)

⁵ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [Url](#), pp. 15-16

⁶ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-17

⁷ OCHA, *Reference Map, Syrian Arab Republic, Damascus Governorate*, 09.04.2015, [Url](#), UN-OCHA-Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

⁸ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [Url](#), pp. 18

The report is based on Skype meetings, telephone interviews and written email correspondences with three well-informed sources in the UK, Washington DC., USA and Beirut, Lebanon, as well as written reports by European COI-units and international organisations.

The sources that were interviewed by DIS were asked how reference might be made to them in the report. All sources are referenced in the report according to their own request. The sources consulted were informed about the purpose of the research and that their statements would be included in a public report. The minutes from the phone and Skype interviews with the sources were forwarded to them for approval, giving them a chance to amend, comment, or correct their statements. All sources approved their statements.

The report is a synthesis of the sources' statements and does thus not include all details and nuances of each statement. In the report, care has been taken to present the views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. The statements of all sources are found in their full extent in Appendix 1 of this report.

For the sake of reader-friendliness, transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes in Appendix 1 have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes. The intention hereby is to make it easier to find the exact place of a statement in the meeting minutes.

This report merely focuses on the aforementioned issue i.e. access to Damascus and the different factors which could potentially hinder individuals from accessing Damascus Province. It is therefore outside the scope of the report to cover all possible factors and outcomes of access to all government controlled areas in Syria regarding the treatment of returnees by the Syrian authorities.

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

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 27 September 2019.

The report can be accessed from the website of DIS, www.newtodenmark.dk, and is thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

Abbreviations

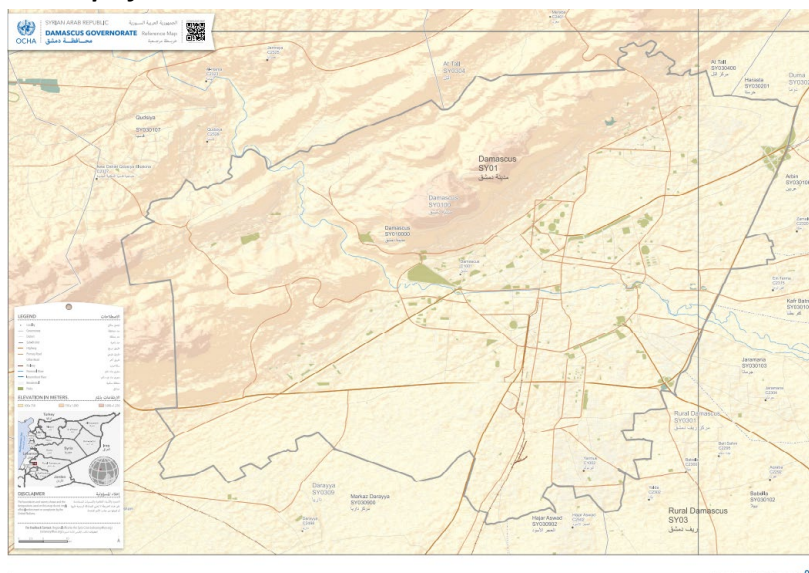
COI	Country of Origin Information
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
IS	Islamic State
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
NDF	National Defence Forces (NDF)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
ToR	Terms of reference
MEI	Middle East Institute

1. General security situation in government-controlled areas in Syria since May 2018

In the spring and summer of 2018, the Syrian government took control of large areas of territory in Syria. Thus, by this point the government was controlling most areas in Syria, except for areas in northern Syria and Tanf in the desert of eastern Syria.⁹ The level of violence and number of security incidents and casualties decreased significantly in the government-controlled areas as reported in three European COI-reports released over the summer of 2019.¹⁰

The security situation in Damascus Province, which includes Damascus City and Yarmouk, has improved significantly since the summer of 2018. This is mainly because the government retook control of the last opposition-held areas in Damascus Province, including Jobar and Yarmouk, and due to the government's clearing of armed rebels from Rural Damascus, including Eastern Ghouta.¹¹

1.1 Map of Damascus Province:



Source: OCHA, *Reference Map, Syrian Arab Republic, Damascus Governorate, 2017*
<https://humanitarianatlas.org/syria/atlasmaps/ocharosyr-atlas2017-damascus-gov.pdf>

⁹ For information about the control situation in Syria see DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#).

¹⁰ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-18; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Sikkerhetssituasjonen*, 30 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-12; The Netherlands, MFA, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria: The security situation*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-55; Sweden, Lifos, *Lifosrapport: Säkerhetsläget i Syrien (version 3.0)*, 1 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-20.

¹¹ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-18; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Sikkerhetssituasjonen*, 30. August 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-12; The Netherlands, MFA, *Country of Origin Information Report Syria: The security situation*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-55; Sweden, Lifos, *Lifosrapport: Säkerhetsläget i Syrien (version 3.0)*, 1 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-20.

The Syrian government's main strategy for recapturing territories was to put opposition-held areas under prolonged sieges and bombings, in order to force opposition groups in most areas to concede or to enter into reconciliation agreements (*musalaha*) with the government. Such agreements were negotiated with mediators such as Russia, Iran, or influential local persons; however, the government negotiated some of the agreements directly with opposition groups. The content of the reconciliation agreements were determined by the strength on the ground. The government was more willing to make concessions in areas where it was under pressure than in areas where the opposition had been more divided and unable to act more unified.¹²

Additionally, in order to keep the regained territories under its control, the Syrian government required individuals to undergo a clearance process (*taswiyat wada'*). Two profiles were required to clarify their situation and reach into an agreement with the government. Firstly, men of conscription age and men who have been fighting against the regime in former opposition-held areas. However, it is unclear whether it is all individuals who have to undergo a clearance process or only men from 18-42.¹³ Secondly, people who exited illegally and want to return to Syrian, have to apply for a clearance at any Syrian representative abroad or at the Syrian border authorities.¹⁴

2. Authorities at checkpoints

As reported in the DIS and DRC report from February 2019, the amount of checkpoints in Damascus Province has decreased significantly since May 2018. In that report sources mention that most checkpoints within Damascus province are concentrated around the central old city and Mezzeh District. The sources explain that checkpoints in Damascus Province have typically been pulled from smaller neighbourhood roads and districts and are instead focused on highways and entry roads into Damascus province, i.e. the M5 highway leading to Homs and the road leading to Damascus International Airport.¹⁵ For further information on the control, procedures, and treatment at checkpoints in Damascus Province as well as the impact of place of origin, and affiliation with opposition groups, please refer to the report by DIS and DRC of February 2019.¹⁶

¹² Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 7-8

¹³ For more information about the individual clearance process for people from former opposition-held areas, see Chatham House, Haid Haid, *Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters*, July 2018, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/joining-the-enemy-how-the-syrian-regime-reintegrates-former-rebel-fighters>, and Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-13

¹⁴ For more information about the individual clearance process for people who exited illegally and want to return to Syria, see Denmark, DIS (Danish Immigration Service), *Syria: Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus*, 20 June 2019, [url](#).

¹⁵ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13

¹⁶ Denmark, DIS & DRC, *Syria, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-18

3. Access to Damascus for persons from former opposition-controlled areas inside Damascus Province

People from former opposition-controlled areas inside Damascus Province, such as Jobar and Yarmouk, are usually less subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints compared to individuals from other former rebel-held areas.¹⁷ According to Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR), the Syrian authorities are well-aware of which residents resided in former opposition areas in Damascus province. Many opposition fighters were evacuated to the rebel-controlled areas in Idlib Province as part of the reconciliation agreements or were subsequently arrested by authorities or conscripted to military service.¹⁸ However, the source emphasizes that it is not unusual for the authorities at checkpoints to conduct extra identity checks of residents from Yarmouk and Jobar against wanted lists to check for rebel affiliation.¹⁹

Landinfo reports that only about 90 families, or up to 4000 people, remain in Yarmouk. Yarmouk was the last area in and around Damascus to reach a reconciliation agreement with the Syrian government in 2018, which led to the evacuation of 5000 people from the area.²⁰ MEI reports that Jobar remains a closed-off area, where entry is prohibited by the Syrian government.²¹

4. Access to Damascus for persons from former opposition-controlled areas outside Damascus Province

Former opposition-controlled areas outside of Damascus Province should be understood as areas that either reached reconciliation agreements with the Syrian government, or areas that were forcibly retaken by the Syrian government.

According to Christopher Kozak (ISW), 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.²²

An international regionally-based humanitarian organisation operating in Syria (henceforth referred to as the International Humanitarian Organisation) states that there is no zero-sum factor determining whether an individual will face scrutiny, checks, interrogation or arrest if he/she is travelling to Damascus. In the eyes of the Syrian government everyone is guilty until proven innocent.²³

¹⁷ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 1

¹⁸ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 1

¹⁹ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 1

²⁰ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 22-23

²¹ MEI and Etana, *Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta*, 14 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 2, 6

²² Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 11, 16

²³ An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 19

However, all three sources agree that the level of opposition activity in an area, both past and present, along with the area's location and the sensitivity of the area with regards to the security for the Syrian government, are key factors for accessing Damascus Province through checkpoints.²⁴

Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR) notes that in general, people coming from former opposition-controlled areas that are close to Damascus province, such as Eastern Ghouta, will most likely be subjected to thorough checks and questioning at checkpoints. The main reason is that these areas are suspected of containing sleeper cells of opposition groups.²⁵ The authorities' suspicion against individuals from Eastern Ghouta is also confirmed by the two other sources.²⁶

In connection with the Syrian governments attempt to limit access to Damascus for Eastern Ghouta inhabitants, Christopher Kozak (ISW) explains that the Syrian government has taken steps to isolate Eastern Ghouta through various military entities and security services, as well as foreign and domestic pro-regime militias, maintaining a series of checkpoints in and around strategic areas of Eastern Ghouta.²⁷ The UN-Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reports similar findings, stating that the vast majority of Douma residents require approval to move from the Douma neighbourhood of Eastern Ghouta into Damascus. If residents are granted permission to access Damascus, they are required to leave their ID-documents with government soldiers at the checkpoints.²⁸

4.1. Individuals from areas formerly controlled by IS

IS lost control of almost all its territory in Syria in 2017. From the summer of 2018 until March 2019 it lost territorial control over its remaining areas in al-Hajar al-Aswad, Suwayda, Deir Ezzor and Rural Damascus.²⁹ With regards to the reconciliation agreements that the Syrian government imposed on former opposition-held areas, the Syrian government refused to enter into agreements with individuals that the government suspected of having an affiliation with IS.³⁰ Consequently, in May 2018, IS fighters and their families from Yarmouk and al-Hajar al-Aswad in Damascus were evacuated to areas bordering Jordan and Iraq in the Badiya desert which was controlled by IS.³¹

²⁴ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 2, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 12, An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 20

²⁵ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 2

²⁶ An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 20; Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 13

²⁷ Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 14

²⁸ *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 11 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14; For a graphic representation of the checkpoints described by the Commission of Inquiry, see MEI and Etana, *Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta*, 14 May 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-7

²⁹ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Sikkerhetssituasjonen*, 30. August 2019, [url](#), pp.16

³⁰ The Syrian government also refused to enter reconciliation agreements with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the White Helmets, media-aktivists and opposition journalists (Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13)

³¹ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-13

Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR) notes that individuals from former IS-controlled areas in the Rif/Rural Damascus province, in particular al-Hajar al-Aswad, are subjected to more scrutiny at checkpoints than individuals from other former rebel-held areas in Rif/Rural Damascus province.³²

However, Christopher Kozak (ISW) has not seen a noticeable difference between areas formerly held by the opposition and areas formerly held by IS (with the key case studies being Southern Damascus and the Yarmouk River Valley) with regard to the extent of scrutiny at checkpoints.³³

4.2. Individuals from areas currently controlled by opposition groups (i.e. Idlib)

In Kozak's (ISW) opinion, the Syrian government at the moment (August 2019) seems to place great scrutiny on individuals from former opposition-held areas rather than individuals from Greater Idlib Province that is currently under opposition control.³⁴ This is, according to Kozak, if for no other reason, due to the fact that the former's population outnumbers the latter's by a large margin. Most individuals from Greater Idlib Province have remained in place, lived in government-controlled areas for most of the conflict, or fled Syria entirely. A second reason mentioned by Kozak is the Syrian government's attempt to reintegrate large populations from former opposition-held areas in Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs, and Southern Syria into government controlled areas and grapple with renewed insurgencies in these locations.³⁵

4.3. Place of registration and place of residence

According to Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR) and the International Humanitarian Organisation, people's place of residence is the determining factor for whether or not they may face scrutiny at checkpoints.^{36 37} If a person can document his or her stay abroad or in an area not controlled by the opposition during the conflict, he or she will less likely face scrutiny at checkpoints.³⁸

³² Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 4

³³ Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 13

³⁴ In this report, Greater Idlib Province is defined as containing Idlib province, parts of north-northwest Hama Province, part of western Aleppo Province and part of northeast Latakia province (Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Syria: Sikkerhetssituasjonen*, 30 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 14-15)

³⁵ Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 15

³⁶ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 5; An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 23

³⁷ It should be noted that both place of registration and place of residence are indicated on the Syrian ID-card. NIDC, National number on Syrian ID cards, 21 December 2018, [url](#)

³⁸ An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 21

The International Humanitarian Organisation notes that there are people living in Damascus City that for instance originate from either Idlib or Aleppo. However, the first time such individuals would pass through a checkpoint into Damascus, they are likely to be subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints.³⁹

Christopher Kozak (ISW) mentions that the Syrian government will generally suspect individuals registered in a former opposition-held area. The level of scrutiny will depend on a number of factors including ethnicity, sect, political history and wanted status.⁴⁰

4.4. Length of time areas have been under government control

Rami Aburrahman (SOHR) and the International Humanitarian Organisation both state that people from areas retaken by the Syrian government earlier in the conflict, for instance in 2015 and 2016, would rarely and less likely be subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints compared to persons from areas that came under government control in 2018.⁴¹ According to SOHR, a few years ago the situation in areas such as Homs was very tense because the government did not trust Sunnis from that province. However, this has changed over time, and the regime does not feel as threatened by people coming from Homs as it did a few years ago.⁴² However, according to the International Humanitarian Organisation, increased insurgent attacks in areas retaken earlier in the conflict may lead to increased scrutiny at checkpoints.⁴³

4.5. Religious and ethnic background

As the civil war evolved, the USA, UK and France backed the rebels, while Russia and China supported and assisted the Syrian government. The alliances that were formed by the Middle Eastern countries from the beginning of the conflict in 2011 and 2012 coincided with the sectarian divisions in Syria. Sunni majority states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, supported and armed different Sunni Muslim opposition groups, which was the sectarian background for the majority of all Syrian opposition groups. However, Shia majority states such as Iran, and Shia militia groups such as Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghani militias assisted the Syrian government, which is led by the Assad family who are Alawites. This added a sectarian dimension to the conflict.⁴⁴

With regards to the treatment of minorities at checkpoints after the government retook areas in and around Damascus province in the summer of 2018, Rami Aburrahman (SOHR) and Christopher Kozak (ISW) states that minorities, such as Christians, Shiite Muslims, Alawites, and Druze, are not subjected to interrogation or checks at the checkpoints in Damascus. The sect or ethnicity will likely be a mitigating

³⁹ An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 22

⁴⁰ Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 16

⁴¹ Aburrahman, Rami (SOHR): 6, An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 24

⁴² Aburrahman, Rami (SOHR): 6

⁴³ An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 24

⁴⁴ Lund, A. *Syria's Civil War. Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?* Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut. December 2018, [url](#), pp.17-18

factor.⁴⁵ People belonging to minorities can be subjected to questioning at checkpoints if their names and place of residence on their ID-cards do not indicate clearly whether they belong to a minority.⁴⁶ In rare instances, people belonging to minority groups may also be subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints depending on the mood of the officer in charge.⁴⁷

According to SOHR, Syrian authorities manning checkpoints do not question or check Kurds entering Damascus as they are not perceived to be a threat by the Syrian government.⁴⁸ However, according to Christopher Kozak (ISW), the Syrian government has independent reasons to be suspicious of Syrian Kurds, e.g. the large stateless population, their autonomy aspiration, and their cooperation with the U.S. anti-IS coalition.⁴⁹

According to the International Humanitarian Organisation, rather than ethnicity, the Syrian government is more focused on an individual's political affiliation and perceived loyalty to the Syrian regime.⁵⁰

4.6. Family relationship to members of opposition groups

Christopher Kozak (ISW) notes that the authorities' suspicion of people from former rebel-held areas also applies to family members of suspected opposition members even if the family members are living in government-controlled areas.⁵¹

According to Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR), family members of individuals perceived to be opposing the regime may also be subject to arrests at checkpoints.⁵²

4.7. Other factors causing scrutiny and problems at checkpoints

Rami Abdurrahman (SOHR) states that it is mostly individuals on the Syrian authorities wanted lists, who would face serious problems such as degrading treatment and arrests at checkpoints.⁵³

Another factor, which may have an impact on the treatment at checkpoints, is the mood and the preference of the commanding officer.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 7; Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 17

⁴⁶ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 9

⁴⁷ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 10

⁴⁸ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 7

⁴⁹ Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 18

⁵⁰ An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 27

⁵¹ Kozak, Christopher (ISW): 16

⁵² Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 3

⁵³ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 3

⁵⁴ Abdurrahman, Rami (SOHR): 10, An International Regionally-based Humanitarian Organisation operating in Syria: 21

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Appendix 1: Meeting minutes

Skype meeting with Rami Abdurrahman, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 12 August 2019

About the source

SOHR was founded in May 2006. From its base in UK, it documents human rights situation in Syria. Based on information collected from 236 sources throughout Syria, SOHR reports on human rights violations committed by the Syrian government as well as the opposition groups.

Persons from former opposition-controlled areas inside Damascus Province

1. People from former opposition-controlled areas inside Damascus Province such as Jobar and Yarmouk are usually less subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints compared to other former rebel-held areas. The government has information about the people who were residing in the area before and knows who were with the opposition and who were not. When the government regained control over the area, most of the fighters decided, as a part of a the reconciliation agreement, to leave Damascus for Idlib, and a number of them who stayed behind were conscripted or arrested later on because they were suspected of still being active for the opposition. For that reason, the authorities are not much concerned that people from these former rebel-held areas, who stay in other areas in Damascus province or have been staying in other areas under the government control, will be a destabilization factor for the security of Damascus. The source emphasised, however, that it is not unusual that the authorities at checkpoints conduct an extra check of the identity of people from Jobar and Yarmouk against wanted lists to see whether they are affiliated with opposition groups.

Persons from former opposition-controlled areas outside Damascus Province

Impact of the opposition group former controlling an area and the level of opposition activity

2. In general, people coming from former opposition-controlled areas that are close to Damascus province, such as Eastern Ghouta, will most likely be subjected to thorough checks and questioning at checkpoints. The main reason behind this is that these areas are suspected of containing sleeping cells of opposition groups.
3. It is mainly people on wanted lists that will face serious problems such as degrading treatment and arrests at checkpoints. People who have family members that are perceived as opposing the regime may also be arrested at checkpoints. The source mentioned a case of a man and a woman from Eastern Ghouta who were arrested because they had a son in the opposition who were on a wanted list.
4. People who have been residing in areas in Rural Damascus that have been under the control of Islamic State (IS), i.e. areas South of Damascus City, will be subjected to more scrutiny at checkpoints compared to people coming from other areas in Rural Damascus. Particularly people coming from al-Hajar al-Aswad may face problems at checkpoints, not only because this area has been under IS control, but more because people from al-Hajar al-Aswad were known even before the conflict for having a leaning towards Islamism.

Impact of place of registration vs. place of residence

5. The authorities are usually not suspicious of persons who are registered in former opposition-controlled areas or in Idlib if they have been residing in government-controlled areas such as Damascus during the conflict or have been living abroad. People's place of residence is the determining factor on whether people face scrutiny at checkpoints. In rare instances, depending on the mood of the officer at the checkpoint, people may go through thorough checks at checkpoints even if they have been residing in government-controlled areas.

Impact of time of regaining control over the area by the government

6. People from areas that have been retaken by the government some time ago will rarely be subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints. Few years ago, the situation in areas such as Homs was very tense because the regime did not trust Sunnis from that province. However, this has changed over time, and the regime does not feel as threatened by people coming from Homs as it did a few years ago.

Impact of one's religious and ethnic background

7. In general, minorities such as Christians, Shia Muslims, Alawites, and Druze are not subjected to interrogation or checks at the checkpoints in Damascus. The Syrian authorities at checkpoints do not question or check Kurds who want to enter Damascus, as Kurds are not perceived as a threat to the Syrian government.
8. Usually Christians have Christian names and would therefore be easily recognised without any need to question them. But as religion and ethnicity are not stated on the Syrian ID-card or other Syrian documents, the officer in charge will not always have a chance to know if a person is from a minority group, so the risk of being subjected to checks cannot be completely ruled out for these groups.
9. "Place of residence" on the ID-card will indirectly indicate whether a person is from an area with a predominantly Christian, Druze or other minority populations. However, if the officer in charge at the checkpoint is ignorant of the demographic patterns of areas populated by minorities, a person from these minorities may risk being subjected to thorough checks at checkpoints.
10. In rare instances, people belonging to minority groups may also be subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints depending on the mood of the officer in charge.

Email interview with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW) 23 August 2019

About the source

Christopher Kozak is the Editor and Senior Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War where he focuses on Syria with an emphasis on the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and its foreign supporters, including Russia and Iran. Kozak is the author of *An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria*

and has published numerous articles on the Syrian Civil War. He has also been invited to provide briefings to political leaders, military officers and intelligence officials from the U.S. and its foreign allies. He studied Arabic at the University of Amman in Jordan and received a B.S. in Political Science and International Studies (Global Security) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2014.

Prevalence of more suspicion against persons from certain former rebel-held areas

11. The Syrian government is suspicious of all individuals suspected of affiliation with the armed opposition, including individuals from former opposition-held areas. It tends to apply this level of heightened scrutiny regardless of whether a population reconciled with the state or found itself conquered by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). ISW has observed tight security controls and reconciliation violations in a range of areas – from Eastern Qalamoun and Damascus to Southern Syria and Northern Homs.
12. That said, Kozak asserts that the level of suspicion and scrutiny also appears linked to the sensitivity of the areas in question for the security of the Syrian government. There are thus very strict security controls on individuals in and around Damascus. The standards are a bit looser (but still strict) for other populations such as Southern Syria or Northern Homs. These areas are both less sensitive than the capital as well as areas where populations by-and-large reconciled en masse and remained in place.
13. Kozak has not seen an appreciable difference in the treatment of individuals across former opposition-held areas across Damascus, although the strictest measures remain centred on Eastern Ghouta. Jobar and Yarmouk for all intents and purposes remain depopulated. Also, Kozak has not noticed an appreciable difference between areas formerly held by the opposition versus areas formerly held by ISIS (with the key case studies being Southern Damascus and the Yarmouk River Valley).
14. Assad's regime has taken steps to isolate Eastern Ghouta from Damascus. The SAA Fourth Division, Syrian State Security and National Defense Forces (NDF) maintain a series of checkpoints along the strategic M5 Highway north of Eastern Ghouta. The SAA Republican Guard, Fourth Division, and Syrian Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence Directorates maintain security at the eastern outskirts of Eastern Ghouta. The IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other militias backed by Iran maintain a security zone south of Eastern Ghouta near the Damascus International Airport and majority-Shiite Sayyida Zeinab District of Damascus.

Prevalence of more suspicion against persons from areas currently under the control of opposition groups (i.e. Idlib) than persons from former rebel-held areas

15. In Kozak's opinion, at the moment, the Syrian government seems to place greater scrutiny on individuals from formerly opposition-held areas rather than individuals from Greater Idlib Province – if for no other reason that the former population outnumbers the latter by a large margin at this point in the Syrian Civil War. Most individuals from Greater Idlib Province have either remained in place, lived in government-controlled areas for most of the conflict or entirely fled Syria. The Syrian government by contrast is currently attempting to integrate (and grapple with renewed insurgency among) large populations from former opposition-held areas such as Eastern Ghouta, Southern Syria, and Northern Homs.

Impact of being registered in a former rebel-held area despite living in a government-controlled area during the conflict, e.g. Damascus City, or abroad

16. The Syrian government will generally suspect an individual registered in a former opposition-held area even if they have spent most of their time living in government-controlled areas during the Syrian Civil War. This level of scrutiny will depend on many factors including their ethnicity or sect, their political history, and/or their wanted status for other crimes (such as desertion or draft avoidance). ISW often sees a variation of this suspicion when authorities apply increased scrutiny to family members of suspected opposition members even if the family members live in government-controlled areas.

Impact of belonging to a traditionally pro-regime ethnic group such as Christians, Druze, Alawite, or being a Kurd

17. Their sect or ethnicity will likely be a mitigating factor but the number of such individuals is very small. The number of such minorities in opposition-held areas is very minimal - especially among Christians, Druze, Alawites, and Twelver Shi'a. Most of these populations fled opposition-held areas due to fears of attack by Salafi-jihadist groups. The only significant population that Kozak recalls stayed in place, are the Druze of Qalb Lawza in Idlib Province, who have been forcibly converted to Islam by Jabhat al-Nusra.
18. The Syrian government has independent reasons to be suspicious of Syrian Kurds – whether it's due to the large stateless population, their aspirations for autonomy, their affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and/ or their cooperation with the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition.

Skype meeting with an international regionally-based humanitarian organisation operating in Syria, 26 August 2019

Persons from former opposition-controlled areas outside Damascus Province

Impact of the opposition group former controlling an area and the level of opposition activity

19. According to the Government of Syria everyone is guilty until proven innocent. There is no zero sum factor that determines whether an individual will face scrutiny, checks, interrogation or arrest if he/she is travelling to Damascus.
20. However two factors are likely to play a role with regard to the treatment of a person intending to enter Damascus receives at checkpoints: the level of opposition activity in the area the person is coming from and the location of the area in question. If an individual is for instance coming from Daara province, where an insurgency campaign against the government is currently unfolding, the individual would most likely face more scrutiny from the government than an individual coming from Rastan (in northern Homs province), where very few attacks against the Syrian government have been reported. Another example is residents from Douma, located in the Rif-Damascus province, who face restrictions with regard to entering Damascus as Douma is located very close to the center of power in Damascus. The likelihood is therefore higher that residents from East Ghouta will draw more attention

to themselves at check points compared to persons from other government controlled areas which have seen lower levels of recorded opposition activities throughout the Syrian conflict.

21. Other factors, which may have an impact on the treatment at checkpoints, are:
 - the mood and preferences of the officer in charge at the checkpoint,
 - the place of residence during the conflict, i.e. if s/he has stayed in former rebel-held areas. If an individual can document his/her stay abroad and thereby can prove that s/he has not stayed in an areas under opposition control, that individual will less likely face scrutiny at check points.
 - If the person passing through the checkpoint is listed on one of the different security lists managed by various security agencies or military entities.
 - whether the individual is known by the regime to have contacts with families with rebel affiliations,
 - whether or not an individual has cleared his status with the Syrian government. There have, however, been cases of individuals being stopped and subjected to scrutiny at check points despite the fact that they have reconciled their affairs with the Syrian government.
 - whether you have been or are still residing in Damascus. If you already reside in Damascus and possess proof of residency papers, there is less likelihood of being subjected to scrutiny at checkpoints.

Impact of place of registration

22. There are people living in Damascus City that for instance originate from either Idlib or Aleppo. The first time such individuals would pass through a check point into Damascus they are likely to be subjected to scrutiny at check points.
23. The government cares more about your background and the area you have stayed in than what is registered on your ID card as place of origin.

Impact of time of regaining control over the area by the government

24. There is less likelihood of the Syrian government being suspicious of individuals coming from former rebel-held areas that were retaken in 2015 and 2016, compared to areas that came under government control in 2018. However, increased insurgent attacks in areas retaken earlier in the conflict might lead to increased scrutiny at checkpoints.
25. The source underlines that it is very difficult to draw general conclusions about the extent of scrutiny an individual can expect at Damascus entry checkpoints as there are many variables at play with regard to gaining access to Damascus city.
26. As several Syrian government entities manage various check points regulating the entry into Damascus, individuals may receive different treatment at different checkpoints depending on the entity controlling the checkpoint.

Impact of one's religious and ethnic background

27. Rather than ethnicity the Syrian government is more focused on an individual's political affiliation and perceived loyalty to the Syrian regime, although in Syria ethnicity generally speaking tends to go along with perceived loyalty towards the regime.
 28. The source underlines that no zero sum factor, including ethnicity, can determine whether or not a person is allowed access to Damascus.
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Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

Factors causing scrutiny and problems at checkpoints at entrances to Damascus City for individuals from former rebel-held areas:

1. Persons from former opposition-controlled areas inside Damascus Province
2. Persons from former opposition-controlled areas outside Damascus Province
 - 2.1. Individuals from areas formerly controlled by IS
 - 2.2. Individuals from areas currently under the control of opposition groups (i.e. Idlib)
 - 2.3. Impact of place of registration and place of residence
 - 2.4. Impact of time of regaining control over the area by the government
 - 2.5. Impact of one's religious and ethnic background
 - 2.6. Impact of family relationship to members of opposition groups
 - 2.7. Other factors