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and Integration

The Danish  
Immigration Service

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## **SYRIA**

### *Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria*

Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017

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## Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.<sup>1</sup> The report is based on approved notes from meetings with carefully selected sources. 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 and should be weighed against other available country of origin information on the situation in the government- and opposition-controlled areas in Syria with regards to recruitment practices of different actors, the situation for public servants and issues related to leaving 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 or the Danish Refugee Council.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO), EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology, 10 July 2012.  
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ffc33d32.html>

## Introduction and methodology

The report at hand focuses on the situation in government-controlled areas in Syria, including recruitment to the Syrian Army and the National Defence Forces (NDF) and involvement of public servants in the ongoing conflict. Additionally, the report covers issues related to the situation in areas controlled by Syrian opposition groups, including recruitment to opposition groups, involvement of civilians in the armed conflict, treatment of public employees as well as issuance of documents by the opposition groups. Finally, the report contains information about exit from Damascus International Airport, consequences of illegal exit and documents needed for movement in the government-controlled areas in Syria.

The report does not address the situation in the areas controlled by the organisation of the Islamic State (IS) or the Kurdish forces, YPG - *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (the People's Protection Units) and YPJ - *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê* (the Women's Protection Units). Thus, the term 'opposition group' in this report does not include the group IS or the Kurdish forces.

The report is the product of a joint mission conducted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Country of Origin Information Division, Danish Immigration Service (DIS) to Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, from 26 March to 5 April 2017. In the planning phase of the mission, contacts were established with relevant sources who confirmed their availability on the given dates of our mission. The mission was limited to sources in Beirut, as well as one source in Amman, that were identified as relevant and central with regard to the terms of reference for the mission. Prior to travelling to Beirut, the delegation also consulted four sources based in the United States, Turkey and Germany via Skype from March 13-15 which are also included in the report hand.

The purpose of the mission was to collect updated information on issues recurring in cases regarding Syrian asylum seekers in Denmark. The terms of reference for the mission were drawn up jointly by DIS and DRC, in consultation with the Danish Refugee Appeals Board as well as an advisory group on COI ("Referencegruppen").<sup>2</sup> The terms of reference are included at the end of the report (Annex B).

In the scope of compiling this report, the delegation consulted 22 interlocutors, comprising international organizations, international non-governmental organizations, academics, think-tanks, analysts, diplomatic representations as well as a lawyer. The sources interviewed were selected by the delegation based on the expertise, merit and role of each source relevant to the mission. Five of the consulted sources are, in agreement with the sources themselves, not included in the report at hand as they were unable to address the issues contained in the terms of reference.

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<sup>2</sup> The group consists of Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International in Denmark, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Dignity, representatives of two Christian organizations ("Europamissionen" and "Åbne Døre"), the National Commissioner of Police and the Danish Bar and Law Society (representing asylum lawyers).

Some of the sources consulted have a presence inside Syria, others travel regularly to Syria and still others follow the situation from outside of Syria, through information from a wide range of sources and contacts.

The sources were asked how reference might be made to them in the report. Some sources requested varying degrees of anonymity for the sake of discretion and upholding tolerable working conditions, as well as for personal safety. All sources are referenced in the report according to their own request.

The sources consulted were informed about the purpose of the mission and that their statements would be included in a public report. The notes from the meetings with the sources were forwarded to them for approval, giving the source a chance to amend, comment or correct his/her statements. All sources, but one, have approved their statements. The source whose statements have not been approved did not revert with an answer before the report's finalisation, despite having been contacted several times. These notes<sup>3</sup> have been included in the report in the forwarded form.

The report is a synthesis of these 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. All sources' statements are found in their full extent in Annex A of this report.

For the sake of reader-friendliness, transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting notes in Annex A 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 each note.

The conflict in Syria is characterized by great complexity due to the many different actors involved on all sides which makes it difficult to provide detailed and precise information on the situation, particularly with regard to the situation in opposition-controlled areas. Reporting on the situation is further complicated by disinformation made available by all sides through different channels.

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 Danish Embassy in Beirut provided valuable assistance in the planning and execution phases of the mission.

The research and editing of this report was finalised by mid-June 2017.

The report is available on the websites of DIS, <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/en-US/> and DRC, <https://drc.dk/about-drc/publications> and thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

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<sup>3</sup> Notes from meeting with Carnegie Middle East Centre



## Abbreviations

<b>COI</b>	Country of Origin Information
<b>DIS</b>	Danish Immigration Service
<b>DRC</b>	Danish Refugee Council
<b>EASO</b>	European Asylum Support Office
<b>FSA</b>	Free Syrian Army
<b>HBS</b>	Heinrich Böll Stiftung
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch
<b>IRGC</b>	Iranian Republican Guard Corps
<b>IS</b>	The organisation of the Islamic State
<b>ISW</b>	Institute for the Study of War
<b>NDF</b>	The National Defence Forces
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>ToR</b>	Terms of Reference
<b>UNHCR</b>	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>YPG</b>	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (the People's Protection Units)
<b>YPJ</b>	Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (the Women's Protection Units)



# 1. The situation in the government-controlled areas

## 1.1. Military service

### 1.1.1. Prevalence of general mobilization

Military conscription of males continues unabated as it has done throughout the conflict.<sup>4</sup> There has been no general mobilisation within the last year (March 2016 - March 2017),<sup>5</sup> but generally, control of military status has been intensified at checkpoints.<sup>6</sup> Several sources said that during 2016, there were waves of intensified efforts to recruit conscripts and reservists, including raids in public areas.<sup>7</sup> Two sources stated that one of the reasons behind raids of this sort was that only few men responded to call ups for conscription and reported for duty.<sup>8</sup>

According to several sources, areas recently taken over by the government forces provide new pools of recruitment for the Syrian authorities. In these areas, there are many men who have never reported for service and are now subject to military conscription.<sup>9</sup>

Several sources noted that the government actively encourages citizens to enrol for service in the armed forces.<sup>10</sup> Some sources emphasized that there are efforts encouraging enlistment to the Fifth Corps<sup>11</sup>, a new structure under the Syrian Army established at the end of 2016.<sup>12</sup>

Groups which previously were able to avoid conscription through deferrals are increasingly under pressure for being conscripted and their possibilities to obtain deferrals or exemptions have been limited.<sup>13</sup> According to a diplomatic source (A), leniencies have been cut back, e.g. university students whose military service was postponed during their studies, are now called up immediately after their final exam rather than at the end of the academic year as was the case prior to the conflict.<sup>14</sup> Another source said that while students studying at master degree level are

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 1, 2; an international organization: 71; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 125; UNHCR: 154; a major international non-governmental organization: 186; Human Rights Watch: 223; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 255; a diplomatic source (A): 258; a diplomatic source (B): 285; Rami (HBS): 371; Carnegie Middle East Center: 410;

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 1; UNHCR: 154; a diplomatic source (A): 258

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 1; an international organization: 71, 73; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 129; UNHCR: 154; Human Rights Watch: 224; a diplomatic source (A): 259, 260, 266; a diplomatic source (B): 292, 293; a diplomatic source (D): 317; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 342; Professor Hilal Khashan: 351; Carnegie Middle East Center: 414; Rami (HBS): 372

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 7; a Damascus-based lawyer: 35; an international organization: 71; UNHCR: 154; Itani: 255; a diplomatic source (A): 259, Rami (HBS): 372

<sup>8</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 35; an international organization: 71

<sup>9</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 186, 187, 188; a diplomatic source (B): 287; a diplomatic source (C): 302; a diplomatic source (D): 314; Dr. Hilal Khashan: 343

<sup>10</sup> A diplomatic source (A): 258; A diplomatic source (C): 305; Christopher Kozak (ISW): 2

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the Fifth Corps, see section 1.2.1.

<sup>12</sup> A diplomatic source (C): 305; Christopher Kozak (ISW): 2; Professor Hilal Khashan: 347

<sup>13</sup> A diplomatic source (A): 258; A diplomatic source (B): 285; UNHCR: 154; a major international non-governmental organization: 189, 212, Carnegie Middle East Center: 410, Rami (HBS): 372, Hilal Khashan: 349

<sup>14</sup> A diplomatic source (A): 258

still able to defer their military service, a new decree from April 2017 states that students at Diploma level are no longer able to do so.<sup>15</sup>

UNHCR also noted a rise in targeting of prisoners, public servants and to some extent also certain religious minorities, which were previously considered as 'protected' with regards to military service.<sup>16</sup> A major international non-governmental organization operating in Syria, similarly noted that the option for many public servants to defer military service has been annulled.<sup>17</sup>

One source said that exemptions for e.g. medical reasons are no longer strictly adhered to and that individuals who have previously been exempted for medical or mental conditions have in some instances undergone renewed medical, physical and mental assessments. The purpose of such assessments has been to identify individuals with minor medical issues who, despite prior exemptions, can be considered fit for either logistical or combat roles.<sup>18</sup>

Two sources mentioned that the government has begun to recruit everyone, also only male children of families who previously, by law, have been exempted from service.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.1.2. Possibility of conscripts in the army avoiding involvement in armed conflict**

The Syrian army mainly relies on a fraction of the armed forces in major offensive operations across the country.<sup>20</sup> Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), elaborated that at this stage in the conflict, in order to take terrain, the regime is relying upon a mix of elite units, loyalist militias, and foreign support (e.g. Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Afghan and Iraqi Shia Militias, and Lebanese Hezbollah). The bulk of the Syrian Arab Army - that is, the conscript-heavy units - plays a much less significant role.<sup>21</sup>

Many conscripts undertake administrative and supporting functions as well as guard duties and are thus able to avoid being sent to the battlefield.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, as corruption is widespread in Syria, including in the Syrian Army, it is possible for conscripts with connections and economic means to influence their place of service and type of duty during service.<sup>23</sup> Two sources

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<sup>15</sup> A major international non-governmental organization:189

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR: 154

<sup>17</sup> A major international non-governmental organization:212

<sup>18</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 126

<sup>19</sup> Professor Hilal Khashan: 345, Carnegie Middle East Center: 410

<sup>20</sup> Hilal Khashan: 349; Christopher Kozak (ISW): 3, A major international non-governmental organization: 193, Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 256

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 3, A major international non-governmental organization: 193

<sup>22</sup> A diplomatic source (B): 290; Christopher Kozak (ISW): 3; Rami (HBS): 375, an international organization: 82, a major international non-governmental organization: 194

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 4; a Damascus-based lawyer: 46; a major international non-governmental organization: 195; Human Rights Watch: 227; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 257; a diplomatic source (A): 265; a diplomatic source (B): 290, 291; Rami (HBS): 376; Professor Hilal Khashan: 353, a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 363

highlighted that at this stage in the conflict, most do not have the economic means to afford the sums necessary in this connection.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, an international organization asserted that conscripts are not able to influence their military service by way of corruption. The government has recently become harder on corruption in the army, making it difficult for those with resources to influence their service.<sup>25</sup> UNHCR similarly stated that there are reports that the government has intensified efforts to crack down on corruption in the army.<sup>26</sup>

One source noted that an individual assigned an administrative task or assigned to serve in a particular area could not count on never being reassigned to another area involving combat duty.<sup>27</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW) noted that the regime had allowed for individuals to fulfil their mandatory service in select NDF groups rather than the army, however added that there were no assurances of such an arrangement.<sup>28</sup>

### 1.1.3. Profile of reservists called up for service

Several sources said that which reservists are particularly at risk of being drafted depends on the qualifications needed by the army.<sup>29</sup> Sources highlighted that whether reservists are particularly targeted for recruitment depends on where an individual has previously served and which qualifications he has acquired<sup>30</sup>, for instance, reservists who have previously served with the air defence are targeted for conscription.<sup>31</sup>

Three sources have on the other hand said that the government no longer exclusively focuses on recruiting reservists with certain qualifications,<sup>32</sup> with one of the sources underlining that this is due to the lack of unity in the army with regard to recruitment strategies.<sup>33</sup> An international organization has similarly stated that it seems quite random how reservists are called up and that it differs from area to area.<sup>34</sup>

One source said that reservists with military qualifications are in high demand. However, the source underlined that even those not being specifically targeted presently could risk being sought

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<sup>24</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 195; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 257

<sup>25</sup> An international organization: 81

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR: 170

<sup>27</sup> Rami (HBS): 375

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 4

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 6; a Damascus-based lawyer: 31, 36; a major international non-governmental organization: 192; a diplomatic source (A): 261, Rami (HBS): 378

<sup>30</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 36; Rami (HBS): 378

<sup>31</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 192

<sup>32</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 132, 133, Professor Hilal Khashan: 345; Carnegie Middle East: 412

<sup>33</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 133

<sup>34</sup> An international organization: 77

after when their specific qualifications were needed and added that the army was recently in a severe need of doctors.<sup>35</sup>

Several sources said that reservists over the age of 42 are recruited and the age scope of reservists called up thus has been widened.<sup>36</sup>

UNHCR and Christopher Kozak (ISW) noted that reservists drafted over the age of 42 are usually those with certain specialized qualifications such as pilots, marksmen, tank drivers, or artillery officers.<sup>37</sup>

*(See section 1.1.4.2. 'Recruitment of men above the age of 42' for more information)*

#### **1.1.4. Recruitment of persons under the age of 18 and over the age of 42**

##### **1.1.4.1. Recruitment of minors**

Generally, minors, i.e. males under the age of 18, are not drafted for military service.<sup>38</sup>

Two sources mentioned that there have been reports of minors close to the age of military service (i.e. 16-17) drafted at checkpoints.<sup>39</sup> One of these sources, UNHCR, said that anecdotal reports include cases of minors appearing to be 18 years of age who at checkpoints have been subjected to harassment and questioning about conscription. There have also been cases of minors appearing to be 18 years or older who have been taken at checkpoints, but usually released again after the families have contacted relevant authorities, although this may not always prove swift and easy in practice, according to the source.<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch said that while recruitment of minors has not been documented by the organisation, the occurrence of it could not entirely be excluded.<sup>41</sup>

According to Professor Hilal Khashan, the Syrian Army wants to give the impression of operating according to the legal provisions set out when it comes to recruitment of minors. Therefore, minors are not recruited, however it cannot be excluded that minors have enlisted voluntarily in support functions, according to the source.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Rami (HBS): 378

<sup>36</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 132; UNHCR: 158; a diplomatic source (A): 261; Rami (HBS): 378, Human Rights Watch: 225, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 6

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR: 158; Christopher Kozak (ISW): 6

<sup>38</sup> An international organization: 79; a Damascus-based lawyer: 45; Christopher Kozak: 5; Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 135; UNHCR: 156; a major international non-governmental organization: 190; a diplomatic source (A): 264; a diplomatic source (B): 289; Professor Hilal Khashan: 350; Rami (HBS): 379; Carnegie Middle East Center: 411.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 5; UNHCR: 156

<sup>40</sup> UNHCR 156

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch: 226

<sup>42</sup> Professor Hilal Khashan: 350

#### 1.1.4.2. *Recruitment of men above the age of 42*

Regarding recruitment of those over the age of 42 to the Syrian army, several sources said that the age limit has been pushed to include men over the age of 42.<sup>43</sup> Two sources noted that the military service age has been extended from 42 up to 50.<sup>44</sup> Another source underlined that while the government continues to draft men between the ages of 18-42, the source had heard of men up to 50 years old being called up as reservists.<sup>45</sup> Two other sources mentioned reports of men in their mid-forties being recruited.<sup>46</sup>

UNHCR asserted that reports of conscription of men over the age of 42 have generally involved qualified personnel with specific expertise and that it is unclear whether the age limit has been raised as part of a government policy or if it instead is happening on a case by case basis. According to UNHCR, as lower-level commanders have been given more authority due to increasing decentralization, it may be on a more local level that commanders have deviated from existing regulations regarding age limits.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Professor Bassel Al-Hassan said that the army commanders have adopted their own recruitment strategies resulting in unpredictable and chaotic recruitment patterns that in themselves constitute an exertion of pressure for potential reservists, according to the source.<sup>48</sup> The source also noted that the authority to specify the age limit of men eligible for service in government forces has been entrusted to the provincial administration (*'Mohafaza'*) and that any person above the age of 40 is considered eligible for military service.<sup>49</sup>

A major international non-governmental organization operating in Syria said that generally, the age limit of recruits to the army is 42. However, agreements that have been made in areas recently taken over by the government show that the age scope of people recruited for the army has been widened to include men up until at least the age of 45.<sup>50</sup> One source referred to reports of men up until the age of 52 being drafted in areas recently retaken by the government forces, for example in Aleppo where many men were immediately recruited to serve in the military.<sup>51</sup>

According to Christopher Kozak (ISW) the recruitment of persons over the age of 42 appears to be more uncommon. However, as the army has run out of skilled manpower, it has tapped into the older population.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch: 225; a major international non-governmental organization: 191, UNHCR: 157, Rami (HBS): 380;

<sup>44</sup> Professor Hilal Khashan: 345; Rami (HBS): 380

<sup>45</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center: 410, 412

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch: 225; a major international non-governmental organization: 191

<sup>47</sup> UNHCR: 157

<sup>48</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 133

<sup>49</sup> Professor Bassal Al-Hassan: 132, 134

<sup>50</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 191

<sup>51</sup> Rami (HBS): 380

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 6

Some sources said that the authorities only conscript men between the ages of 18-42.<sup>53</sup> Two of these sources asserted that men over the age of 42 who enlist in the army or other government forces, such as the NDF, do so voluntarily,<sup>54</sup> and one has said that reports of conscription of men over the age of 42 to the Syrian Army have mainly been rumours.<sup>55</sup>

### **1.1.5. The authorities' capacity and willingness to pursue deserters and evaders of military service**

Living in government-controlled areas as an evader or deserter of military service is very difficult due to constant risk of being taken at fixed or mobile check points.<sup>56</sup> Freedom of movement and access to government services is thus extremely restricted for evaders and deserters of military service.<sup>57</sup>

Evaders and deserters of military service are primarily pursued through checkpoints as well as through raids in public areas.<sup>58</sup>

According to UNHCR and Rami (HBS), the Syrian authorities continue to pursue evaders and deserters through house searches, however UNHCR noted that it is unclear how far the government would pursue wanted persons individually.<sup>59</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW) said that resources are stretched and the authorities' means of pursuing evaders and deserters is generally characterized by targeting populations in general rather than pursuing specific individuals.<sup>60</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer pointed out that there are too many evaders to search for them at their home, however the authorities have in certain cases searched for evaders and deserters at their home, for instance, when only a low percentage of men called up have reported for service, or if a deserter has switched to fighting for the opposition.<sup>61</sup>

### **1.1.6. Consequences for evaders and deserters**

Evaders, when caught, risk being sent to military service, while deserters risk more severe consequences such as imprisonment or the death penalty.<sup>62</sup> Two sources highlighted that

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<sup>53</sup> An international organization: 78; a Damascus-based lawyer: 45; a diplomatic source (B): 289

<sup>54</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 45; An international organization: 78

<sup>55</sup> Damascus-based lawyer: 45

<sup>56</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 42, UNHCR: 155, 164, Human Rights Watch: 223, 224, Carnegie Middle East Center: 415

<sup>57</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 44; an international organization: 74; UNHCR: 164; a major international non-governmental organization: 201; a diplomatic source (A): 267; a diplomatic source (D): 318; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 364; Rami (HBS): 381; Carnegie Middle East Center: 415

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 7; a Damascus-based lawyer: 38; an international organization: 71, 73; Professor Al-Hassan: 129; UNHCR: 161; a major international non-governmental organization: 196, 200, 208; a diplomatic source (A): 259; a diplomatic source (B): 292; a diplomatic source (D): 317; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 342; Professor Hilal Khashan: 351; Rami (HBS): 381.

<sup>59</sup> UNHCR: 163; Rami (HBS): 381

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 10

<sup>61</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 38, 41

<sup>62</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 9; a Damascus-based lawyer: 38, 40; an international organization: 75; Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 130, 131; UNHCR: 161; a major international non-governmental organization: 197, 198; Human Rights Watch:

deserters generally face similar treatment as individuals suspected of affiliation to opposition groups.<sup>63</sup> According to UNHCR, evasion as well as desertion would usually be considered an expression of political dissent.<sup>64</sup>

At times, deserters have re-entered military service through amnesties and/or local agreements.<sup>65</sup> Several sources said that deserters, as well as evaders who live in areas recently regained by government forces, re-enter service in government forces in accordance with local agreements. The conditions of the agreements and options given to deserters and evaders, e.g. with regard to type of service and where, vary from place to place dependent on local circumstances.<sup>66</sup>

Three other sources said that deserters in practice have been sent back into military service<sup>67</sup> and to the battlefield<sup>68</sup> when caught.<sup>69</sup>

#### **1.1.7. Possible consequences of evasion or desertion for family members**

As regards consequences of evasion or desertion for family members, several sources said that family members risk being subjected to pressure and interrogations from the authorities and at times detention.<sup>70</sup>

Some sources emphasized that family members of high-profiled deserters face a higher risk of being targeted by the authorities.<sup>71</sup> According to one source, family members to deserters who are wanted for e.g. having killed army personnel or having been part of an operation against the army, would be put under pressure, for instance by bringing in a family member, often a father or brother.<sup>72</sup>

An international organization said that a person's act of evasion or desertion would not, in itself, have consequences for his family members. Families of high-profiled persons among opposition groups, however, would be closely monitored by the authorities. The source knew of people in Damascus with relatives fighting in opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta who due to the activities of their relatives have been pressured to provide information about them when addressing

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228; a diplomatic source (A): 266; a diplomatic source (B): 292; a diplomatic source (D): 319; Professor Hilal Khashan: 352; Rami (HBS): 382; Carnegie Middle East Center: 417

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 9; Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 131

<sup>64</sup> UNHCR: 162

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 9; a Damascus-based lawyer: 39; an international organization: 80; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 131

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 9; an international organization: 80; a major international non-governmental organization: 187, 188; a diplomatic source (C): 302, 303; a diplomatic source (D): 314, 316

<sup>67</sup> Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 256; Dr. Hilal Khashan: 352; Rami (HBS): 383

<sup>68</sup> Dr. Hilal Khashan: 352; Rami (HBS): 383

<sup>69</sup> Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 256; Dr. Hilal Khashan: 352; Rami (HBS): 383

<sup>70</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 11; a Damascus-based lawyer: 43; UNHCR: 166; a major international non-governmental organization: 199; Human Rights Watch: 228, an international organization: 76, Rami (HBS): 384

<sup>71</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 43 an international organization: 76; UNHCR: 166; a major international non-governmental organization: 199; Rami (HBS): 384

<sup>72</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 43



themselves to the authorities, for example in connection with passport issuance.<sup>73</sup> Rami (HBS) similarly concurred that only family members of deserters or evaders who have actively been fighting against the government are at risk of ill-treatment.<sup>74</sup> According to a diplomatic source (A), since the beginning of the conflict, there have been cases of individuals of a political profile where the authorities have detained family members in order to exchange him or her with the person in question, but the source has not heard of similar cases relating to draft evaders or deserters.<sup>75</sup>

## 1.2. The National Defence Forces (NDF)

### 1.2.1. The Fifth Corps

When speaking of the National Defence Forces (NDF), an umbrella organization under which pro-government militias are organized, several sources highlighted that the NDF is in a state of fragmentation<sup>76</sup> due to recent developments, including the establishment of a Fifth Corps.<sup>77</sup> Several sources noted that the intention of the establishment of the Fifth Corps is to centralize the control of pro-government forces, i.e. militias, under Syrian Army command.<sup>78</sup>

Professor Hilal Khashan explained that the corps has been established with the intention of building a capable fighting component organized under the Syrian Army while dismantling the NDF which has grown notorious: the NDF is reputed to constitute armed groups fighting over the spoils of war, terrorizing local populations and imposing protection money in areas where they hold control.<sup>79</sup>

Some sources highlighted that the Fifth Corps is still in the process of taking form and that the NDF militias to some extent continue to exist and operate as before.<sup>80</sup>

Two sources referred to reports of the Fifth Corps involvement in the operation to recapture Palmyra in March of 2017.<sup>81</sup> However, several sources emphasized that it remained to be seen to what extent the Corps is engaged on the battlefronts and how effective it is.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> An international organization: 76

<sup>74</sup> Rami (HBS): 386

<sup>75</sup> A diplomatic source (A): 268

<sup>76</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 12

<sup>77</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer 37; Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 136; a diplomatic source (A): 269; Professor Hilal Khashan: 346

<sup>78</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 205; a diplomatic source (A): 269; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 362; Professor Hilal Khashan: 348

<sup>79</sup> Professor Hilal Khashan: 346

<sup>80</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 136; a major international non-governmental organization: 206; Professor Hilal Al Khashan: 347

<sup>81</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 2, a major international non-governmental organization: 206

<sup>82</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 206; a diplomatic source (A): 270; a diplomatic source (C): 308; Professor Hilal Khashan: 347



### 1.2.2. Recruitment to the NDF

Several sources stated that enlisting in NDF militias generally takes place on a voluntary basis and members enlist primarily due to financial incentives and for the purpose of protecting their local areas.<sup>83</sup>

Some sources highlighted that members of NDF militias supplement their income through activities such as looting and extortion of individuals and that this forms another incentive for joining.<sup>84</sup> According to UNHCR and Christopher Kozak (ISW) there are reports of NDF members being permitted by the government to use their positions as a *carte blanche* for looting, blackmailing or taking bribes.<sup>85</sup>

Some sources mentioned that social pressure stemming from the local community or from family plays a role in pushing individuals to join pro-government militias such as the NDF. Whether pressure exists depends on the given area and local dynamics.<sup>86</sup>

Two sources noted that in certain situations young men otherwise eligible for conscription made up part of the recruitment base for the NDF.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, UNHCR stated that joining the NDF is seen by many as the preferred option to that of the Syrian army and three other sources concurred that for some, enlisting in the NDF had been an alternative to mandatory military service.<sup>88</sup>

Christopher Kozak (ISW) highlighted that individuals eligible for mandatory military service do not have much of a choice when faced with the difficult decision of either volunteering for NDF or being conscripted into the army.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, several sources noted that in areas recently taken over by government forces, there are examples of men from the areas being given the option of enlisting the ranks of the NDF, joining the army or leaving the area for Idlib, in accordance to local agreements.<sup>90</sup>

Some sources said that NDF militias are involved on the battlefronts in the Syrian conflict.<sup>91</sup> Two sources explained that those who volunteer in offensive operations receive the highest pay as a reward for the risks taken while serving the NDF.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 14, 19; a Damascus-based lawyer: 30, 39; an international organization: 83; UNHCR: 168, 169; a major international non-governmental organization: 202, 229; a diplomatic source (B): 294; Rami (HBS): 385; Carnegie Middle East Center: 421, Human Rights Watch: 229

<sup>84</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 19; Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 140; a major international non-governmental organization: 202; a Damascus-based lawyer: 53

<sup>85</sup> UNHCR: 169, Christopher Kozak (ISW): 19

<sup>86</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 17; an international organization: 85, 87; Human Rights Watch: 229, Carnegie Middle East Center: 422

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 13, a Damascus-based lawyer: 50

<sup>88</sup> UNHCR: 168, a major international non-governmental organization: 202, a diplomatic source (B): 290; a Damascus-based lawyer: 50

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 17, 18

<sup>90</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 51; an international organization: 80; a diplomatic source (B): 287; a diplomatic source (C): 303; Professor Hilal Khashan: 344

### **1.2.2.1. Recruitment of minors and women to the NDF**

Some sources said that minors enlist in the ranks of the NDF<sup>93</sup> and that the prospect of an income plays an important role.<sup>94</sup> One source highlighted that minors are subjected to ideological propaganda which push them to volunteer themselves to assist pro-government militias.<sup>95</sup>

An international organization said that minors are not recruited to the NDF. He explained that only persons over the age of 18 receive salaries in the NDF, and there is, thus, no economic incentive for minors to join.<sup>96</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer similarly said that in order to register and receive a salary, those who enlisting in the NDF have to be over 18. However, the lawyer considered that there could be cases in rural areas, where minors who previously have been part of opposition groups have joined NDF militias.<sup>97</sup>

Women are recruited to the NDF,<sup>98</sup> mainly for tasks such as screening women at checkpoints, according to several sources.<sup>99</sup>

### **1.2.3. Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support government forces**

Regarding the prevalence of pressuring civilians to support government forces by providing information, sources have said that Syrian authorities made use of an informant-system before the start of the conflict<sup>100</sup>, and civilians continue to be pressured into providing the authorities, particularly the security branches, with information.<sup>101</sup> Two sources considered that pressure to provide information has further intensified in accordance with a greater need for security-related information.<sup>102</sup> Two sources pointed out that various factors determine why some civilians act as informers: while some perhaps provide the authorities with information out of support for the government, others do so to stay well-connected or to avoid problems.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 202; HRW: 232

<sup>92</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 14; a major international non-governmental organization: 202

<sup>93</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 14, a Damascus-based lawyer: 52, a major international non-governmental organization: 203, Rami (HBS): 386, Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 140

<sup>94</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 52; a major international non-governmental organization: 203; Rami (HBS): 386

<sup>95</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 140

<sup>96</sup> An international organization: 87

<sup>97</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 52

<sup>98</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 15; a Damascus-based lawyer: 52; an international organization: 88; a major international non-governmental organization: 204; Human Rights Watch: 231

<sup>99</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 15; an international organization: 88; Human Rights Watch: 231

<sup>100</sup> UNHCR: 173; a major international non-governmental organization: 210; a diplomatic source (D): 320, an international organization: 97

<sup>101</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 54; an international organization: 97; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 141; UNHCR: 173; a major international non-governmental organization: 210; a diplomatic source (D): 320; Rami (HBS): 388

<sup>102</sup> UNHCR: 173; a major international non-governmental organization: 210

<sup>103</sup> An international organization: 97; a Damascus-based lawyer: 54

Consequences for refusing to cooperate with the authorities are serious, and several sources noted that those who refuse to comply, risk being suspected of opposing the government.<sup>104</sup>

Some sources said that depending on the area, civilians could be pressured on a local level to provide logistical support, such as food or shelter, to the Syrian army or other government forces.<sup>105</sup> UNHCR mentioned for instance that in 2013, when faced with threats of US air strikes after the chemical attacks on Ghouta, it was reported that the military/security forces moved into private houses presuming certain military/security facilities would be targeted in the event of strikes.<sup>106</sup> Two sources mentioned that refusing to comply with such a request is not an option.<sup>107</sup>

One source, an international organization, noted that there have been no indications that pressure on civilians to support government forces have been taking place.<sup>108</sup>

### 1.3. Public servants

#### 1.3.1. Prevalence of coercing public servants to engage in pro-regime activities

Public servants are required to fulfil their military service obligation and are called up like all Syrian men of military service age.<sup>109</sup>

According to UNHCR, a decree has been issued stating that having fulfilled one's military service is a precondition for being employed with the government.<sup>110</sup> A major international non-governmental organization operating in Syria mentioned that up until a year ago, public servants were able to fulfil their military service obligation whilst in their government position unless they had qualifications which the army was in need of. This option, however, has now been annulled.<sup>111</sup>

A diplomatic source (C) considered that the Syrian government wants the government institutions to be intact and functioning and is therefore careful about whom they conscript from the public sector. However, the source assumed that if the situation in the battlefield changes and the government became desperate, it could change its attitude and force its employees to join the pro-regime forces.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 141; UNHCR: 173; a major non-governmental organization: 209, 211; Human Rights Watch: 233; a diplomatic source (D): 320; Rami (HBS): 387

<sup>105</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan 141, UNHCR: 172; a major non-governmental organization: 209; Human Rights Watch: 233; Rami (HBS): 387; Carnegie Middle East Center: 423

<sup>106</sup> UNHCR: 172

<sup>107</sup> Human Rights Watch: 233, a major non-governmental organization: 209

<sup>108</sup> An international organization: 97

<sup>109</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 31; an international organization 91: UNHCR: 174; a major international non-governmental organization: 212; a diplomatic source (A): 271, Rami (HBS): 390

<sup>110</sup> UNHCR 174

<sup>111</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 212

<sup>112</sup> a diplomatic source (C): 309

Public servants are also encouraged, as well as pressured to join local pro-government forces and the Fifth Corps or risk losing their benefits as public servants.<sup>113</sup>

Christopher Kozak (ISW) also mentioned circulars instructing employees within government institutions to register in the Fifth Corps even though most employees have already completed their mandatory service.<sup>114</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan similarly asserted that circulars have been issued by the Health Department entrusting governorates with the authority to recruit those assessed to be suitable to the Fifth Corps.<sup>115</sup>

Regarding pressure on public employees to support the government in other ways than enlisting in the army or other pro-regime forces, several sources said that at the beginning of the conflict, in 2011, there were examples of public servants being pressured to participate in pro-government activities, e.g. demonstrations in favour of the government, however this no longer occurs.<sup>116</sup> Human Rights Watch considered that pressure to support the government is more acute in some government institutions, and mentioned examples of teachers being asked to inform on students or doctors being hindered in performing critical medical procedures on persons suspected of anti-government loyalty.<sup>117</sup>

### **1.3.2. Consequences of refusing to partake in pro-regime activities**

Government employees risk losing their position and/or benefits when failing to comply with requests from the authorities to enlist in the army, the Fifth Corps or pro-government militias, according to some sources.<sup>118</sup> UNHCR said that those who do not fulfil their military service obligation, will according to the Presidential Decree No. 33 of 2014 have their government employment terminated and would likely be perceived as taking a political view against the government resulting in the same consequences as for draft evaders.<sup>119</sup>

According to an international organization, public servants who refuse to fulfil their military service obligation will be registered officially as wanted for conscription and would be stopped at checkpoints.<sup>120</sup>

According to Human Rights Watch, refusing to comply in partaking in other activities requested by the government is not an option.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 2, 18; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 142; Professor Hilal Khashan: 354

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Kozak: 20

<sup>115</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 142. For more regarding involvement of state bodies in enlistment to the Fifth Corps, including circulars from state institutions, see article by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi: *The Fifth Legion: a New Auxiliary Force*, December 24, 2016, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/19504/the-fifth-legion-a-new-auxiliary-force>

<sup>116</sup> An international organization: 93; UNHCR: 178; a diplomatic source (A): 273; Rami (HBS): 389

<sup>117</sup> Human Rights Watch: 234

<sup>118</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 2, 18, 20; Professor Hilal Khashan: 354 UNHCR: 174

<sup>119</sup> UNHCR: 174, 177

<sup>120</sup> An international organization: 92;

<sup>121</sup> Human Rights Watch: 234

### 1.3.3. Travel restrictions on public servants

Public servants at all levels are obligated to obtain an authorization from their respective place of employment to leave the country.<sup>122</sup> Higher ranking officials as well as those in sensitive positions, e.g. within the Ministry of Defence, employees working in the oil sector, at the national museum, for the cabinet or the president, would not be able to obtain - or would rarely be given - an authorization.<sup>123</sup>

One source noted that government employees in all fields – from military to education – were rarely given authorization to leave the country.<sup>124</sup>

### 1.3.4. Consequences of abandonment of government position

Two sources said that consequences of abandonment of a government position depend on what position a public servant holds and reasons behind abandonment. In practice, consequences could range from termination of employment, questioning about reason for leaving, losing of benefits to fine or jail.<sup>125</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan said that employees that had left the country without authorization from his place of work would face an investigation upon return in order to uncover reasons for having left.<sup>126</sup>

One source explained that most employees could avoid such consequences by making use of other avenues such as bribes or joining the NDF.<sup>127</sup> However, employment in some governmental institutions such as military research centres, security forces and the military in general, carried strong sensitivities and leaving these places of employment without notice would raise serious suspicion with the authorities.<sup>128</sup>

While one source found that leaving one's position without prior authorization may raise suspicion upon return to Syria,<sup>129</sup> another source found the situation characterized by a high degree of arbitrariness leading to uncertainty regarding consequences of abandonment of one's position.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 21; Damascus-based lawyer: 32; an international organization: 94; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 143, UNHCR: 179; a major international non-governmental organization: 213; Human Rights Watch: 235; a diplomatic source (A): 273; a diplomatic source (D): 321; Rami (HBS): 391; Professor Hilal Khashan: 356

<sup>123</sup> An international organization: 95; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 143; UNHCR: 179, a major international organization: 213; a diplomatic source (A): 273; Rami (HBS): 391, a Damascus-based lawyer: 32

<sup>124</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 21

<sup>125</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 214; Rami (HBS): 392

<sup>126</sup> Professor Bassal Al Hasssan: 145

<sup>127</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 34

<sup>128</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 34, a major international non-governmental organization: 214

<sup>129</sup> UNHCR: 180

<sup>130</sup> Rami (HBS): 392

## 2. The situation in opposition-controlled areas

### 2.1. Prevalence of forced recruitment by opposition groups

According to a diplomatic source (A), there are a wide array of different opposition groups in areas outside of government control and a multitude of factors affect the circumstances under which groups exert control in a given area. Generalizing on armed opposition groups and their modes of conduct in areas under their control is therefore very difficult.<sup>131</sup>

Some sources noted that recruitment patterns vary from area to area depending on local dynamics and groups in question.<sup>132</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan said that generally all warring parties increasingly recruit their fighters on the basis of ethnic and religious motives due to the escalating sectarianism.<sup>133</sup>

Most sources said that recruitment of fighters to armed opposition groups generally takes place on a voluntary basis.<sup>134</sup>

Economic necessity is a significant incentive pushing men to join armed groups in the face of few other options for earning a living.<sup>135</sup> Personal conviction motivated for example by religion and opposition towards the regime make up other factors pushing people to join armed groups, according to sources.<sup>136</sup> Several sources have noted that certain armed groups utilize religion in order to mobilize men.<sup>137</sup>

Most sources considered that social pressure to join armed groups exists in opposition-controlled areas,<sup>138</sup> and some sources noted that whether or not social pressure is prevalent depends on the area and local circumstances.<sup>139</sup>

An international organization highlighted that jihadist groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra<sup>140</sup> use force in recruiting and refusing to join jihadist groups would be considered equal to siding with the

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<sup>131</sup> A diplomatic source (A): 276

<sup>132</sup> An international organization: 99; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 146; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 245, Professor Hilal Khashan: 358

<sup>133</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 146

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 23; a Damascus-based lawyer: 55; a major international non-governmental organization: 215; 217; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 245; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 330; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 367, 368

<sup>135</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 55; A major international non-governmental organization: 215, 217; Human Rights Watch: 236; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 245, 247; a diplomatic source (A): 297; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 367

<sup>136</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 55; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 246, 248; Professor Hilal Khashan: 358; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 367

<sup>137</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 26; a Damascus-based lawyer: 55; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 146; Rami (HBS): 394, a

<sup>138</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 23, 26; a Damascus-based lawyer: 55; Human Rights Watch: 236; a diplomatic source (C): 311, a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 333; a diplomatic source (A): 279; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 248; Rami (HBS): 395

<sup>139</sup> A diplomatic source (C): 311, a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 333

regime.<sup>141</sup> Contrarily, a major international non-governmental organization said that a group such as Al-Nusra only trusts and recruits persons whom it knows and whose families are known to them.<sup>142</sup> A third source stated that Jabhat Al-Nusra relies heavily in their recruitment on a religious, sectarian and ideological propaganda.<sup>143</sup>

A diplomatic source said that while there are a number of stories of forced recruitment by groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra, such reports are hard to confirm not in the least due to the amounts of propaganda circulating from the groups themselves and those opposing them.<sup>144</sup>

Finally, an international organization stated that while the FSA generally did not use force when recruiting members, in the face of attacks from the Syrian government, armed groups, including the FSA, forced everyone to join them.<sup>145</sup>

### 2.1.2. Recruitment of minors and women

There are examples of minors in armed opposition groups.<sup>146</sup> One source highlighted that jihadist groups make use of minors in their ranks.<sup>147</sup> Some sources said that minors are often used in non-combat roles,<sup>148</sup> while others mentioned examples of minors participating in fighting as well.<sup>149</sup> Minors are generally not recruited by force, according to several sources.<sup>150</sup> One source asserted that when under attack, opposition groups would coerce everyone, including minors, to fight.<sup>151</sup>

Two sources noted that minors have also been pushed to enlist in armed groups through religious indoctrination.<sup>152</sup> Two sources considered that generally in high casualty conflicts, young people growing up in a highly militarized environment are particularly susceptible to joining armed groups.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> The group changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al Sham in 2016 and in 2017 merged with other factions to create Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. See Wilson Center, April 24, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/al-qaedas-latest-rebranding-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

<sup>141</sup> An international organization: 99

<sup>142</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 216

<sup>143</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 146

<sup>144</sup> A diplomatic source (C): 310

<sup>145</sup> An international organization: 99

<sup>146</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 24; a Damascus-based lawyer: 56; an international organization: 100; a major international non-governmental organization: 219; 247, a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 331; Rami (HBS): 397, a diplomatic source (A): 278

<sup>147</sup> An international organization: 100, 101

<sup>148</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 24; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 247; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 331

<sup>149</sup> An international organization: 100; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 147; a major international non-governmental organization: 219;

<sup>150</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 24; a Damascus-based lawyer: 55; a major international non-governmental organization: 219, Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 247; a diplomatic source (A): 278; Rami (HBS): 396

<sup>151</sup> An international organization: 99, 100

<sup>152</sup> Human Rights Watch: 237; Professor Hilal Khashan: 359

<sup>153</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 56, Professor Hilal Khashan: 359



Women are not recruited to armed opposition groups, according to several sources.<sup>154</sup> Some sources said that there are examples of women in armed opposition groups, however women are most often involved in non-combat roles.<sup>155</sup>

### 2.1.3 Prevalence of men avoiding involvement in the armed conflict

Regarding the extent to which men capable of carrying arms and fighting are able to remain uninvolved in armed activities in areas under opposition control, several sources said that many men who stayed in those areas did not participate actively in the armed conflict.<sup>156</sup>

One of the sources noted that there were areas where the proportion of men who did participate actively in the armed conflict was higher, for example areas where many civilians had been displaced from i.e. East Aleppo prior to the regime regaining control of the area. The source considered that many had not involved themselves because of fear or disillusionment with the insurgents, while quite a few plainly did not believe that winning the fight was feasible.<sup>157</sup>

Two sources asserted that the extent to which men capable of carrying arms were able to remain uninvolved was dependent on local circumstances.<sup>158</sup> One of the sources, a Damascus-based lawyer, assessed that in areas characterized by armed confrontations, not taking up arms and participating in fighting may entail losing face before one's community.<sup>159</sup> Human Rights Watch on the other hand, highlighted that individuals aligned with opposition groups did not necessarily take up arms and participate actively in the armed conflict, but could also take on civilian tasks for the group in control, e.g. through work in local councils.<sup>160</sup>

One source said that it was very difficult for men capable of carrying arms to live in areas under opposition control without taking up arms and participate in fighting in one's area. The source found that men had few alternatives in such areas and that many therefore either fought for the groups or moved from these areas to government-controlled areas.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 25; a major international non-governmental organization: 220; Professor Hilal Khashan: 360; Rami (HBS): 396

<sup>155</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 56; an international organization: 100; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 148; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 332

<sup>156</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 26; a major international non-governmental organization: 218; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 251; a diplomatic source (B): 298

<sup>157</sup> Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 251

<sup>158</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 58; Human Rights Watch: 238

<sup>159</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 58

<sup>160</sup> Human Rights Watch: 238

<sup>161</sup> An international organization: 105



## 2.2. Prevalence of civilians forced to support opposition groups in the armed conflict

Some sources said that opposition groups who are local to an area generally benefit from the support of the local population.<sup>162</sup> Two sources said that civilians at times provide support to groups in some areas and whether or not such activities are provided voluntarily depends on the local dynamics, i.e. the relationship with the local militias.<sup>163</sup> One source noted that members of ethnic and religious minorities living in opposition-controlled areas mostly comply with any demand in order to remain safe and avoid possible repercussions of not being perceived to be supportive of the group controlling the area.<sup>164</sup>

Several sources considered that there are instances of civilians being forced or pressured to support armed opposition groups depending on local circumstances and the groups residing in the area.<sup>165</sup> According to two sources, jihadist groups pressure civilians to support them with shelters, food and information.<sup>166</sup>

One source noted that refusing to assist opposition groups is not an option<sup>167</sup> and three other sources mentioned that those who refuse to provide support to jihadist groups could be punished<sup>168</sup> or risk trial in a sharia court.<sup>169</sup> Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council) noted that consequences for refusing assistance to armed groups depend on the particular group and local dynamics and explained that for example, Jabhat Al-Nusra has built a legal structure to punish those who do not assist them, including physical punishment. He added that Jaysh Al-Islam (in Ghouta and Douma, suburbs to Damascus) has been very coercive towards individuals to assist the group and that refusing to assist the group would entail severe punishment even though the group is local to the area.<sup>170</sup>

## 2.3. Treatment of public servants by opposition groups

Public servants who reside in opposition-controlled areas generally do not face ill-treatment at the hands of opposition groups due to their prior employment with the government.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 27; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 149; 150; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 333

<sup>163</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 149; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 249

<sup>164</sup> Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 150

<sup>165</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 27; a Damascus-based lawyer: 57; an international organization: 103; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 333, Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 249, a diplomatic source (D): 323

<sup>166</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 221, an international organization: 103

<sup>167</sup> An international organization: 103

<sup>168</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 57

<sup>169</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 221; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 250

<sup>170</sup> Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 250

<sup>171</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 60; an international organization: 109; Professor Bassel Al Hassan: 151; a major international non-governmental organization: 222; Human Rights Watch: 239; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 253; a diplomatic source (D): 324; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 335, 336; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 369; Rami (HBS): 399

Several sources asserted that those employed in positions in e.g. state security services or high-ranking positions in the Baath party could come under suspicion and risk ill-treatment by opposition groups if they still reside in those areas.<sup>172</sup>

Christopher Kozak (ISW) noted that those employed by the government generally are viewed with more suspicion, however the source underlines at the same time that those with links to the military, intelligence or other state security services are particularly at risk.<sup>173</sup>

Some government employees still receive salaries from the government despite living in areas outside of government control.<sup>174</sup> One of the sources highlighted that Jabhat Al-Nusra is an exception to the rule, as it perceives such employees to be taking money from the infidels.<sup>175</sup> However, overall, getting paid by the government would not in itself cause problems for government employees living in opposition-controlled areas.<sup>176</sup>

Some sources noted that certain categories of public servants are in demand in areas under opposition control, such as doctors and nurses.<sup>177</sup> Two sources asserted that employees with particular qualifications, e.g. doctors as well as teachers, are expected by the opposition groups in control to use their profession in the areas.<sup>178</sup> One source mentioned that teachers in areas where jihadist groups are in control are obliged to instruct in accordance to the group's ideology.<sup>179</sup>

One source said that those who do not comply with the demands of the opposition group face severe punishment<sup>180</sup> and another source noted that such individuals would be viewed as pro-government or as a traitor by opposition groups<sup>181</sup>. Finally, one source highlighted that those who refuse to cooperate with jihadist groups risked being jailed.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> An international organization: 110; a major international non-governmental organization 222; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 253; Human Rights Watch: 239; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 335; Rami (HBS): 401, 402

<sup>173</sup> Christopher Kozak (ISW): 29

<sup>174</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 59; an international organization: 110, 114; a major international non-governmental organization: 222; Human Rights Watch: 239; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 336; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 369; Rami (HBS): 399

<sup>175</sup> A major international non-governmental organization: 222

<sup>176</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 60; an international organization: 109; a major international non-governmental organization: 222; Human Rights Watch: 239; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 336; a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization: 369; Rami (HBS): 399

<sup>177</sup> An international organization: 111; a diplomatic source: 324; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 253

<sup>178</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 60; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 253

<sup>179</sup> A diplomatic source (D): 324

<sup>180</sup> Professor Bassel Al-Hassan: 152

<sup>181</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 60

<sup>182</sup> An international organization: 111

## 2.4. Issuance of documents by opposition groups

Lack of documents is generally a widespread problem for civilians living in opposition-controlled areas. In areas taken over by the Syrian government forces from opposition groups, many civilians find themselves in need of valid documentation related to e.g. marriage, birth and death.<sup>183</sup>

Opposition groups have issued different types of personal documents, related to identity, marriage, birth and death to civilians in areas under their control.<sup>184</sup> However, attempts by opposition groups to provide administrative structures parallel to the Syrian state, capable of providing valid documents to civilians in areas under their control, have not succeeded.<sup>185</sup>

Some sources advised that in some cases, opposition groups have issued documentation valid in areas under their control,<sup>186</sup> or documentation required for moving from one opposition-held area to another.<sup>187</sup>

## 3. Exiting Syria

### 3.1. Exit from Damascus International Airport

#### 3.1.2. Access to Damascus airport, including security on the road

The road to Damascus airport from Damascus is considered safe according to several sources.<sup>188</sup> One of the sources, an international organization, elaborated that 80% of the route to the airport from Damascus is under the full control of the Syrian Army, while there are risks of clashes with opposition groups on the remaining 20% approximately five kilometres from the road on both sides.<sup>189</sup> The same source added that since the beginning of the conflict, there have been approximately four-five security incidents on the 30 kilometres distance between the city centre and the airport.<sup>190</sup>

#### 3.1.3. Required documentation

Individuals travelling out of Syria through the airport must be in possession of a passport. Men are rigorously checked regarding their military service status at border points, thus they are required to hold their military booklet as well.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> An international organization: 116; a diplomatic source (D): 326; a diplomatic source based in Turkey: 339; Rami (HBS): 403

<sup>184</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 61; Human Rights Watch: 240; A diplomatic source (A): 281; a diplomatic source (D): 325; Rami (HBS): 403

<sup>185</sup> A diplomatic source (B): 299; Rami (HBS): 403; a Damascus-based lawyer: 61; a diplomatic source (D): 325

<sup>186</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 62; an international organization: 115

<sup>187</sup> A diplomatic source based in Turkey: 340

<sup>188</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 68; Rami (HBS): 404; an international organization: 120

<sup>189</sup> An international organization: 120

<sup>190</sup> An international organization: 119

<sup>191</sup> UNHCR: 181; Human Rights Watch: 242; Rami (HBS): 405

### 3.1.4. Authorities present at the airport

Authorities present at the airport include intelligence and security services,<sup>192</sup> as well as other authorities such as immigration authorities and airport authorities.<sup>193</sup> One of the sources explained that an individual would be checked by three to four different authorities including the police, the Air Force Intelligence, the Political Security Directorate and Military Intelligence, making it very difficult to avoid detection.<sup>194</sup>

### 3.1.5. Prevalence of corruption

Although corruption is extensive in Syrian government institutions, it is considered unlikely or immensely difficult that a person who has an outstanding issue with the authorities can make use of bribery in order to be allowed to leave the country via the airport.<sup>195</sup> According to two sources, making use of bribery is possible for those with considerable sums of money as well as the right connections.<sup>196</sup>

Another source highlighted that the risk of using bribes at the airport is considered very high as it is a place of strict control.<sup>197</sup>

Several sources said that those with outstanding issues with the government or those without proper documents generally make use of the land border when leaving Syria.<sup>198</sup>

## 3.2. Possible consequences of exiting Syria illegally

Assessing the situation regarding how Syrians returning to the country are treated is generally considered difficult<sup>199</sup> due to lack of information on the question<sup>200</sup>, the arbitrariness of how laws are implemented<sup>201</sup> as well as the fact that this would depend on many factors.<sup>202</sup>

Exiting Syria illegally, i.e. without a valid passport/ID card or without the required travel authorization or through an unauthorized departure point is in principle subject to imprisonment and/or fines based on the applicable law (Law No. 18 of 2014), according to UNHCR.<sup>203</sup>

Syrians who have left the country illegally, that is without required travel authorization or through an irregular border point, risk detention, or a serious penalty upon return to Syria, according to

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<sup>192</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 66; an international organization: 123; a diplomatic source (B): 301; Rami (HBS): 404

<sup>193</sup> An international organization: 123

<sup>194</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 66

<sup>195</sup> An international organization: 121, 122; Faysal Itani (Atlantic Council): 243; A diplomatic source (D): 327; Human Rights Watch: 243

<sup>196</sup> Human Rights Watch: 243; A diplomatic source (D): 327

<sup>197</sup> Rami (HBS): 407

<sup>198</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 65; Human Rights Watch: 243; a diplomatic source (C): 313; a diplomatic source (D): 327

<sup>199</sup> UNHCR: 185; a diplomatic source (B): 282, 283; a diplomatic source (D): 328

<sup>200</sup> UNHCR: 185

<sup>201</sup> UNHCR: 182, 183; Rami (HBS): 409; a Damascus-based lawyer: 70

<sup>202</sup> a diplomatic source (B): 283

<sup>203</sup> UNHCR: 182

several sources.<sup>204</sup> One source noted that there had been reports of disappearances of people who have taken by authorities at checkpoints after having returned.<sup>205</sup>

Some sources asserted that having left the country illegally is a factor that would raise suspicion from the authorities about the individual,<sup>206</sup> and whether he or she is hiding something from the authorities.<sup>207</sup> According to UNHCR and Rami (HBS), other factors that may raise the authorities' suspicion include one's place of origin (if originating from an area under opposition control)<sup>208</sup>, possible activities while abroad, relatives (perceived to be) involved with the opposition, not having completed military service, or general appearance (e.g. people who appear to be religious based on their dress).<sup>209</sup> According to Rami (HBS) there are instances of individuals undergoing heightened scrutiny if returning with passports that have been stamped by Turkish authorities bordering areas controlled by opposition groups or suspected of being controlled by opposition groups.<sup>210</sup>

A Damascus-based lawyer explained that the law prescribing punishment for leaving the country illegally, could be circumvented by for example paying a bribe, using the right connections and/or showing one's loyalty by joining the NDF or the army.<sup>211</sup>

One source, an international organization, asserted that in practice, no one would be punished merely for having left illegally given that a large number of people have left Syria illegally.<sup>212</sup> The source further said that such individuals are required to go through the official procedures and obtain necessary documents at a Syrian embassy before entering Syria, or they would face difficulties with the authorities upon return and risk detention.<sup>213</sup>

## 4. Documents

Generally, Syrian citizens are required to be in possession of their Syrian national ID. Additionally men are required to hold their military booklet in order to prove their military status in order to move within Syria and for access to services.<sup>214</sup>

A Damascus-based lawyer asserted that in order to access administrative offices for e.g., the purpose of marriage or birth registration, citizens are obliged to be in possession of their IDs as

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<sup>204</sup> UNCHR: 182; Human Rights Watch: 244; Rami (HBS): 408, a Damascus-based lawyer: 69

<sup>205</sup> Human Rights Watch: 244

<sup>206</sup> UNHCR: 184; Human Rights Watch: 244; Rami (HBS): 408, 409

<sup>207</sup> Human Rights Watch: 244

<sup>208</sup> UNHCR: 184, 185, Rami (HBS): 409

<sup>209</sup> UNHCR: 184, 185

<sup>210</sup> Rami (HBS): 409

<sup>211</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 70

<sup>212</sup> An international organization: 123

<sup>213</sup> An international organization: 124

<sup>214</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 63, 64; an international organization: 117, 118; Human Rights Watch: 241; a diplomatic source (B): 300, a diplomatic source (D): 329

well as military booklets for men.<sup>215</sup> The same source explained that for instance evaders or deserters would have difficulties accessing services: for example in Syria, obtaining a power of attorney cannot be done without being screened by the secret service.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 64

<sup>216</sup> A Damascus-based lawyer: 44

## Consulted sources

- A Damascus-based lawyer
- A diplomatic source (A), Beirut
- A diplomatic source (B), Beirut
- A diplomatic source (C), Beirut
- A diplomatic source (D), Beirut
- A diplomatic source based in Turkey
- A major international non-governmental organization operating in Syria
- An international organization
- A senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organization
- Carnegie Middle East Centre, Beirut
- Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War
- Dr. Hilal Khashan, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, American University of Beirut
- Faysal Itani, Senior Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, the Atlantic Council
- Lama Fakihi, Human Rights Watch, Beirut Lebanon
- Professor Bassel Al-Hassan; Faculty of Political Science, Lebanese University
- Rami, consultant on Syria and Iraq to Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East Office, Beirut
- UNHCR, Office of the MENA Director; Amman, Jordan

## Annex A: Meeting Notes

### Skype meeting with Christopher Kozak, Institute for the Study of War

14 March 2017

#### Situation in government-controlled areas

##### Military service in government-controlled areas

1. Christopher Kozak said that within the last twelve months, there had not been any new major recruitment drives similar to the mass reservist mobilizations announced in 2014. Rather open-source information indicated the steady continuation of previous recruitment drives with continued reports of conscription at checkpoints across Syria. The quantity of reports on daily conscription campaigns decreased over the past two years, which according to the source could be due to decreasing intensity of such campaigns or simply because the sources who reported on these issues had fallen off the radar. Generally, the same trends as the previous two years were observed: individuals were recruited directly to the army with very minimal training before being sent to front lines. There had been anecdotal reports of individuals reporting for duty and dying within days, most probably due to limited training experience.
2. The Syrian government continued to use pressure on government employees to enrol in the military. Parallel to general conscription efforts in Syria, there were reports of efforts to establish a volunteer-based Fifth Storming Corps based in Latakia Province with apparent backing from Russia. This unit formed in November 2016 and, according to reports, played a role in recent operations to recapture Palmyra from ISIS in early March 2017. The source noted reports of public servants being forced to enlist in the Fifth Storming Corps in order to continue to collect their salaries and other benefits. Prior to the establishment of the Fifth Storming Corps, the government also formed a Fourth Storming Corps in Damascus immediately after the intervention of Russia in the Syrian Civil War in 2015. There have been few reports regarding the Fourth Storming Corps, however, and the source did not consider that it had much success in recruiting. By contrast, the Fifth Storming Corps seemed to involve a more concerted effort to enlist volunteers with reports of active recruitment in Al-Hassakeh and Latakia Provinces.

##### *Military conscripts in the Syrian Army avoiding involvement in armed conflict*

3. With regard to the involvement of conscripts in combat activities, Christopher Kozak emphasized that the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) primarily relies upon a small fraction of elite forces to conduct offensive operations across the country. Therefore, he believed that many conscripts remained involved in day-to-day activities such as administrative roles,



guard duties, and securing static frontlines rather than active offensive combat, even at this stage in the conflict. In certain combat divisions, including the Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Divisions in Southern Syria, conscripts primarily remained close to their home bases and did not seem to be involved in regular offensive activities. The source noted that the government tended not to trust the loyalty of conscript-heavy units and thus usually withheld them from frontline combat. Meanwhile, elite units such as the Fourth Armoured Division, the Republican Guard, and Syrian Special Forces are generally perceived as loyal and dominated by large numbers of pro-government minorities such as Alawites and Druze. These elite units generally led most offensive operations alongside with pro-regime militias and foreign troops. The source noted that at this stage in the conflict, in order to take terrain, the regime relied upon a mix of elite units, loyalist militias, and foreign support (e.g. Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Afghan and Iraqi Shia Militias, and Lebanese Hezbollah). The bulk of the Syrian Arab Army - that is, the conscript-heavy units - play a much less significant role.

#### *Prevalence of corruption in the Syrian Army*

4. Christopher Kozak had heard of cases of conscripts paying bribes to officers to avoid frontline military service. With the formation of the National Defence Forces (NDF), the regime allowed individuals to fulfil their mandatory military service in select pro-regime paramilitary groups rather than the Syrian Arab Army. However, several incidents had shown that there were no assurances of this particular arrangement. In February 2017, one such paramilitary group – the Desert Hawks – became caught in a conflict with government authorities in Latakia Province, prompting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to order the withdrawal of more than nine-hundred individuals who had been fulfilling their mandatory military service in the group.<sup>217</sup>

#### *Recruitment of minors or individuals over the age of 42*

5. The recruitment of minors was not a government policy or systematic occurrence, according to the source. However, there were reports of minors close to the age of military service (i.e. 16-17) being drafted at checkpoints. These incidents occurred on a local level on a relatively common basis. The source noted that the decision of whether or not a person close to the age of military service would be conscripted ultimately depended upon the personnel at the checkpoint.
6. The recruitment of persons over the age of 42 appeared to be more uncommon. However, as the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has run out of skilled manpower, it tapped into the older population. There have been isolated reports of individuals over 42 being mobilized as

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<sup>217</sup> <http://iswresearch.blogspot.dk/2017/03/irans-assad-regime.html>

reservists. In these cases, the individuals in question had generally been qualified personnel, e.g. marksmen, tank drivers or artillery officers. The military service booklet carried by all men contains annotations regarding useful skills, and individuals with these notations were those who were being pursued.

### *Draft evaders and deserters*

7. The source considered that desertion from the army has become much less common over the past two years. There have been isolated reports of continued desertion where individual soldiers defected to opposition groups for protection. At this stage, however, men eligible for conscription generally tried to avoid mandatory service by hiding or fleeing the country. The regime continued to pursue those who evaded or deserted military service by erecting flying checkpoints, conducting raids on specific areas such as street cafés or buses, and taking individuals that could not prove exemptions.
8. The regime continued to tighten restrictions on foreign travel for males between the age of 18 and 42. There had been a slight loosening of some travel restrictions. For example, the government recently lowered the financial hurdles to travel if one could post a sponsor and a financial guarantee. However, in practice, granting authorization to travel for men between the age of 18 and 42 remained very rare with only individuals not eligible for conscription or travelling for a pressing reason allowed to leave as the regime remains in need of manpower.
9. Deserters caught by the authorities generally face the same treatment from the Syrian authorities as individuals connected to opposition groups, including imprisonment in major military prisons such as Seydnaya Prison near Damascus. The government has offered localized and general amnesties to deserters with individuals allow to begin or resume their mandatory military service rather than face imprisonment. These types of arrangements often took place when the regime recaptured areas previously under the control of opposition groups. In these instances, deserters had been offered deals in which their status could be 'normalized' by joining the ranks of the military or pro-regime paramilitary groups in order to avoid immediate imprisonment.
10. The source had heard cases of specific evaders and deserters being pursued by political and military intelligence services, although it seemed that this remained uncommon. Resources are stretched, and the authorities' means of pursuing evaders and deserters is generally characterized by the targeting of populations in general rather than pursuing specific individuals.

11. Regarding possible consequences for family members of evaders and deserters, the source said that there had been some reports of interrogations and collective punishment targeting the family members of persons wanted for military service.

### **The NDF**

12. Christopher Kozak said that recent months had seen a reversal of the consolidation of the National Defence Forces (NDF) - the umbrella organization of pro-regime militias formed in 2013. The cohesion of the NDF has suffered due to the regime's inability to pay salaries to its members despite promises that member groups would be funded and supported by the state. This failure has led to the re-fragmentation of the NDF over the past year. In 2014, the manpower of the formal NDF was roughly 80 - 90,000 individuals while the current formal membership is considered closer to 30,000 individuals. The remainder of these fighters have joined various militias run by local businessmen, foreign benefactors, and different state security branches with less oversight from the state. Although some pro-regime militias and units still retain a public affiliation under the NDF, most groups do not operate under the direct command of government but rather answer primarily to local commanders, making them independent actors in the conflict.

### **Recruitment to the NDF**

13. Young men otherwise eligible for conscription made up the recruitment base for the National Defence Forces (NDF). Individuals that enrolled in paramilitary groups under the NDF were typically enticed by the perspective of high salaries and the ability to serve closer to home.
14. When asked about prevalence of forced recruitment to the NDF, the source noted that this phenomenon was very rare given the incentive-based structure of the NDF. The source added that generally NDF members received salaries along a pay scale based upon individual risk. For example, militiamen that guarded checkpoints and searched cars received the lowest pay while those who volunteered to fight in offensive operations received the highest pay. Generally, salaries offered by the NDF had gone down since 2015, which had resulted in an uptick in reports of criminality by militiamen including reports of extortion of individuals, thefts, etc.
15. There had been a few reports of women being recruited to the NDF, primarily for tasks such as manning checkpoints for the purpose of screening other women. However, the source emphasized that there was not much information on this phenomenon.
16. Regarding prevalence of recruitment of minors to the NDF, there have been documented instances of minors serving with the NDF. However, the source noted that recruitment of minors was not prevalent or systematic. The source suggested that minors likely

voluntarily joined the NDF and noted that there was not much evidence of enlistment of minors much younger than 17. The source underlined that recruitment of minors was not a widespread phenomenon and local circumstances played a role with regard to whether this took place.

17. The source noted that real pressures to join local units or militias did exist. The source had seen reports of individuals being pressed and eventually agreeing to join the NDF. Individuals eligible for mandatory military service did not have much of a choice when faced with the difficult decision of either volunteering for NDF or being conscripted into the SAA. The source also noted the role of social pressure, official coercion, and local circumstances in pushing young men to join paramilitary groups such as the NDF.
18. In relation to pressure from the government, the source said that he had seen isolated reports of government employees being pressured to volunteer with hometown units. For example, individuals could be forced to take a limited role such as standing guard at checkpoints twice per week with risk of losing salaries or other benefits. There is also a general economic factor that presents real pressures to join the NDF. Membership in the NDF is a viable option to make ends meet in the lack of other means to support oneself or one's family. Generally, the source considered it difficult to assess the extent to which the economic factor versus the fear of being recruited to the army served as the main driver for recruitment the NDF.
19. However, the source emphasised that the majority of NDF members ultimately volunteered to the NDF because of financial or personal incentives. Many fighters in paramilitary groups – particularly among pro-government minority populations - also volunteered to combat what they perceive to be an existential threat to themselves and their community. There have been numerous reports of these groups being involved in criminal activities. In Aleppo City, for example, there have been regular reports of looting and extortion of individuals by paramilitary groups. There are examples of circulated directives from local and provincial authorities authorizing looting as a means of supplementing one's salary while serving in paramilitary groups. The source noted that such reports indicated that these activities have been tolerated if not encouraged by authorities.

### Government employees

20. Government employees were in some instances pressured to enrol for military service. The Directorate of Education and the Directorate of Health both recently issued circulars instructing employees to register in the Fifth Storming Corps even though most employees had already completed their mandatory service. Similar top-down pressures existed within numerous government institutions to pressure employees to join the reserves or pro-

government militias at the risk of losing their salaries, benefits, or positions. Although the source suggested that such circulars likely stemmed from high levels of government, presumably from the national level, the way such measures played out and were enforced locally differed from province to province.

21. Regarding travel restrictions, the source said that generally, government employees at all levels were required to obtain authorization to be able to leave the country. The source considered it rare that government employees in all fields – from military to education - were given authorization to leave the country. However, the government did recently lower the financial guarantee posted when traveling abroad from 100,000 to 50,000 Syrian Pounds. Travel nonetheless seemed highly limited for official purposes and practically impossible for private matters.
22. The restrictions barring males between the ages of 18 to 42 from travelling abroad still remain in effect. However, the source had heard of individual exceptions where men within this group were allowed to leave for medical purposes. The source noted that men in general between 18 and 42 still faced restrictions on leaving the country even if they had completed their military service.

## **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

### **Recruitment by opposition groups**

23. Enrolment in opposition groups was generally voluntary, although there were reports of social pressure to join the opposition groups.
24. Regarding recruitment of minors, the source said that he had not seen evidence of minors being coerced into joining opposition groups. However, the source noted documentation of minors fighting on the frontlines with opposition groups, although the minors in such cases mostly carried out combat support roles such as carrying food and ammunition while participating only occasionally in combat roles. In several instances, the documented minors appeared to be relatives of opposition fighters also involved in the clashes.
25. The source had not heard or seen reports of women serving any military or military support roles within opposition groups.

### **Civilians in opposition-controlled areas**

26. Regarding the prevalence of men not involved in armed groups' activities, the source said that a large population of men including draft dodgers lived in the areas under the control of opposition groups without necessarily serving as fighters. At the same time, there was social and religious pressure from opposition groups to mobilize local Sunnis who were

perceived as not fulfilling their duties as members of the local or religious community by failing to fight against the regime.

27. The source had not heard reports of civilians being pressured or forced to support opposition groups with assistance, such as food, shelter or first aid, but could not exclude that such incidents had happened. Generally, opposition groups local to an area benefitted from local support structures and did not necessarily need to force local populations to provide such assistance. Nevertheless, the source pointed out that civilians had to remain cautious about their activities in opposition-held areas. As an example, the source mentioned that individuals who did business with the regime or related to individuals serving in the military risked coming under suspicion from opposition groups.
28. Asked about possible consequences of refusing to support opposition groups or coming under suspicion of cooperation with the regime, the source noted imprisonment in an opposition-run detention facility or beatings as a likely consequence. However, while there were a large number of activists reporting from opposition-held areas, the source had not heard many reports of such treatment. The source noted the presence of threats and intimidation, particularly from the more Salafi-Jihadist groups, but stated that there was not much evidence of consequences for refusing to join a group beyond intimidation or pressure. On the other hand, an individual in areas under opposition control that provided support to pro-regime forces or ISIS would face extreme consequences.

### **Treatment of government employees**

29. The source noted that former government employees living in opposition-controlled areas were viewed with more suspicion with cases of individuals being interrogated or detained by opposition groups due to their previous government employment. These suspicions covered all government employees but clearly intensified if the individual had links to the military, intelligence, or other state security services.

### **Meeting with Damascus-based lawyer**

Beirut, 31 March 2017

### **Situation in government-controlled areas**

#### **Government employees**

30. The source said that government employees were attracted to the prospect of getting a higher income when joining the National Defence Forces (NDF). As a member of the NDF, employees were able to collect both their salary from their government employer as well as from the NDF.

31. Some government employees were conscripted as reservists. Which government employees were conscripted as reservists depended on the qualifications needed by the army, and on which unit in the army that needed reserves. Employees with military qualifications such as tank drivers were mostly wanted.
32. Most government employees were not allowed to leave the country without obtaining authorization from their place of work. In certain professions obtaining an authorization was more difficult than others. For example, teachers did not face issues obtaining authorizations, while it was harder for officials within the Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Defence, employees of government research facilities and police and immigration officers. Employees within the justice system and the public health care system were usually able to obtain authorizations to travel.
33. If an employee had left the country without authorization from his place of work, good connections and bribes could enable him to return to his work place. If a person did not have the right connections or was unable to pay a bribe to the right people, he could risk being jailed or punished financially, but he could perhaps solve his outstanding issue by serving the country, for example by joining the NDF.
34. A government employee that abandoned his place of work could in practice risk a financial punishment or jail penalty in certain instances. However, most would avoid such consequences by making use of other avenues such as bribes or joining the NDF. Employment in some governmental institutions however, carried strong sensitivities, such as military research centres, security forces and the military in general. Leaving these places of employment without notice would raise serious issues with the authorities.

### **Military service**

35. The government had intensified efforts to recruit conscripts in the last three months (the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017) by releasing a public announcement to call reservists who were due for military service, with the exception of males who were exempted due to studies or because they were only sons in the family. Because the percentage of men who enrolled subsequently to this notice from the authorities was quite small, the authorities began conducting raids in public places in order to seek out those eligible for service. This included searches in restaurants and other public places.
36. Whether reservists were particularly targeted for recruitment was dependent on where he had served, his qualifications, e.g. types of weaponry and tasks he was specialized in.
37. Parallel to these efforts, the government established the Fifth Corps which was to be engaged in commander operations and be present throughout the country. Those willing

to serve in the newly-founded corps were yearly-contracted, but their service nonetheless enabled them to avoid conscription to the army. The new corps engagement on the ground had already been documented in battles in Latakia and Hama, where 12,000 men were organized under the Syrian Army, according to the source. The source explained that the corps was trained by Syrian and Russians experts, while the NDF had been trained by Syrian and Iranians experts. Those who enrolled received better salaries than in the army. Furthermore, government employees could retain their salaries during the service in the Fifth Corps, in addition to the salary paid by the corps. The creation of the Fifth corps was partly rooted in challenging the NDF structure and curbing Iranian influence, according to the source.

### *Draft evaders and Deserters*

38. According to the source, there were too many evaders to search for them at their home, and evaders were mainly confronted at checkpoints. However, the authorities did at times pursue evaders through house searches. For instance, when only a low percentage of men called up reported for service, the authorities had in certain cases conducted house searches. Draft evaders caught at checkpoints were sent directly to the military police and after fifteen days of arrest, sent to serve in the army.
39. Deserters were in some instances able to enter in agreements with the authorities and subsequently re-enter military service. Amnesties towards members of the police force, as well as members of the army who had deserted their positions, had in some instances been issued, making it possible for such persons to return to their old units.
40. Legally, desertion and espionage could ultimately lead to death penalty. Sometimes deserters who were caught, for example at checkpoints, suffered more severe consequences, for example execution or imprisonment. However, the source considered that if a deserter had not acted against the government, he most likely would be brought back to his unit.
41. Deserters, who had switched to fighting for the opposition, were pursued more intensely. They were pursued by the authorities through targeted searches, including house searches as well as through general controls at check points.
42. The source explained that the authorities checked IDs at all checkpoints, however not all checkpoints had computers and thereby access to databases of those wanted for military service. Some checkpoints were more focused on controlling smuggling of goods, guns and ammunition. Men's identity would be checked with regard to military service status at all checkpoints with computer access. Checkpoints at main roads and streets as well as



checkpoints surrounding entrances to cities all had computer access. Additionally, there were also mobile checkpoints that moved locations and popped up in new areas.

43. Regarding possible consequence to family members, the source said that family members to deserters who were wanted very badly by the authorities, because they for instance had killed members of the army or had been part of an operation against the army, would be put under pressure, for instance by bringing in a family member, often a father or brother.
44. The source considered that evaders of military service and deserters could live in areas under government control if they limited their movement and avoided detection at checkpoints or in some cases if they paid a bribe to the right people. However, any contact with the authorities, when accessing services for example, would be difficult. As an indication of this, the source explained that getting a power of attorney in Syria could not be done without being screened by the secret service.

#### *Recruitment of minors or individuals over the age of 42*

45. The source said that reports of recruitment of men over the age of 42 to the Syrian Army were mainly rumours. However, there were many examples of men over the age of 42 enlisting voluntarily in the NDF. The source had never heard of minors being conscripted to the Syrian army.

#### *Prevalence of corruption in the Syrian Arab Army*

46. Due to the low average of salaries in the Syrian Army, the doors were open for corruption in the army as a way of supplementing one's income and this was by no means a new phenomenon. The source considered that conscripts had been able to influence their position, place of service and type of work in the Syrian Army, e.g. performing mainly deskwork or unarmed activities, through bribing and good connections. According to the source, once a person was placed in an 'easy' position, for instance doing administrative work, he would not be moved to other positions the rest of his service.
47. The source said that from the start of the conflict up unto the present, no conscripts had been released officially from service upon completing the mandatory time of service. However, those who had been discharged anyway, had been released through bribery where it was made possible for them to avail themselves of legal exemption options, such as medical reasons.
48. The source further said that he had heard of cases where conscripts had been able to pay a bribe and serve from home without physically enlisting in the army until their mandatory service time was completed and then discharged. According to the source, in such cases,

conscripts were officially registered as conscripts, and the authorities, who had taken the bribe, arranged the official paperwork regarding the nature of the service. The source described the nature of corruption in Syria by saying that one paid bribes for things to be done and for it to appear legal, and not for omitting the official requirements and procedures completely.

### **The National Defence Forces (NDF)**

49. The NDF collaborated with the Syrian army, but was not under army command. Enrolment in the NDF was voluntary and many had joined in order to receive an income and protect their local areas. The source also considered the privilege of carrying weapons as an incentive to join the NDF for many.
50. There were certain areas where men had been able to replace their mandatory service with service in the NDF, however this was not overall.
51. In some areas recently taken over by the government from opposition groups, fighters in opposition groups had entered into local agreements with the Syrian authorities whereby they became part of the NDF in their local area. By such agreements, these fighters laid down their arms as opposition fighters against the regime and took on the role of keeping security in their local area as part of the NDF under the army's supervision. Those who did not want to join the NDF, or join the army, had to leave the area for Idlib.
52. Women served in specific female NDF militias and there were also Baath party militias in which women served. Those enlisted were generally over the age of 18, as one had to be 18 or older in order to register and receive a salary. However, the source assumed that in instances where former opposition fighters had joined the ranks of the NDF, it was possible to find cases of minors at 16-17 years of age being part of the NDF. That could be for instance the case in rural areas, where former opposition groups who had now joined the NDF operated.
53. Further to the question of enrolment in the NDF, the source said that the NDF had had a poor reputation as many of the early groups that came under its organization were former troublemakers, and were in effect joining its ranks in order to carry on with their criminal activities in a more 'legalized' manner.

### **Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support the Syrian Army or pro-government groups**

54. The source considered that many civilians had provided information to the authorities, however, these had generally received payment for such a service. The source did not consider that providing information occurred under force. Incentives to provide

information to the authorities included revenge motives. It could not be excluded that provision of information occurred under some sort of pressure: people found themselves under indirect pressure to provide information as they or their neighbourhoods otherwise would face problems with the authorities for example. Theoretically and practically, the government was able to pressure people through the intelligence services and instilling a fear of investigation by these state actors. The source considered that those who did not comply with a possible request for information from the authorities, had left government-controlled areas or Syria.

## **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

### **Recruitment to opposition groups**

55. Religion played an important role in recruitment of men to opposition groups in rural areas outside of government control. Particularly religious militants employed religion as a means of manipulating people to join their ranks and fight a non-believer regime which showed those areas and their populations little interest. According to the source, such rhetoric motivated men to join the groups. Even more moderate groups, such as FSA, made use of religion. He added that the Free Syrian Army had not been as successful in enrolling men in their ranks as it had not used religion to the same extent as other groups. Other factors that might push people to join opposition groups included issues of revenge and the prospect of an income. The source underlined that recruitment to opposition groups took place voluntarily, but did not exclude that there was also social pressure to join.
56. The source said that a large number of minors at 16-17 years of age had been recruited to opposition groups. Many children had grown up in an environment which was very militarized and therefore the taking up of arms by young men would not be unfamiliar, according to the source. There were examples of women being recruited to opposition groups and one could find women carrying weapons, however more often women assisted with tasks such as cooking and medical services.

### **Pressure on civilians to support the opposition groups**

57. The source considered that many provided information voluntarily, however that it could not be excluded that there were cases of persons pressured to do this as well. Civilians could also be pressured to provide food, shelter or other kind of support. The source assumed that those who refused to provide support could be punished, however, he emphasized that he was not sure about the extent to which it happened.

### **Prevalence of men not involved in the armed conflict in rebel-held areas**

58. The extent to which men capable of carrying arms were able to remain uninvolved in armed activities in areas under opposition control was very dependent on local

circumstances and the extent of violence. It was the source's assessment that in areas characterized by fighting and armed confrontations, one could avoid being involved in the armed conflict for a limited period of time (a few months) as not taking arms and participating in fighting may entail losing face before one's community. Additionally, the source considered that men had few options of earning an income in rebel-held areas, and joining a group was a way of sustaining oneself and one's family.

### **Treatment of government employees by opposition groups**

59. The source said that the Syrian government had been paying salaries to their employees in areas outside of government control. However, as of last year (2016), there were efforts by the government to control which employees in effect were no longer serving the government and therefore should have their payments annulled. The source explained that the regime controlled this either from the place of work, by relying on direct communication from the government employees or by relying on information from informants in opposition-controlled areas.
60. Generally, opposition groups had not ill-treated persons who had received salaries from the government, for example teachers, doctors, police and judges, however, the groups had demanded of such employees that their qualifications be applied for the good of the area. The source considered that if a government employee did not comply with such demands, he or she would be considered a pro-government/traitor by opposition groups

### **Documents issued by opposition groups**

61. The source considered that documents related to birth, death and marriage had been issued in areas outside of the government's control. However, the source mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to see when such documents were issued and whether they were valid or not. To what extent such documents would be valid in government-controlled areas depended on court decisions in these areas.
62. Regarding issuance of identification documents in areas under opposition groups' control, the source mentioned that he knew of some groups that had issued their own documents at some point, for example Jaysh Al-Islam who had issued ID documents used for movement in an area under their control.

### **Movement in government-controlled areas**

63. For movement within government-controlled areas, a person had to be in possession of his or her Syrian ID. Additionally, if a man was of military service age, that is between the ages of 18-42, he would have to have his military booklet which contained information regarding one's military service status, including information about possible exemption due to study or other reasons

64. In order to access administrative offices in order to register marriages or birth of children for example, Syrians had to have their IDs as well as military booklets, for men.

## **Exiting Syria**

65. Generally, an individual with outstanding issues with the authorities or individuals holding false documents would not have travelled through the airport. The source considered that no one would bear the risk of taking that route out of Syria, as the risk and the cost would be too high compared to crossing the land border illegally.
66. When travelling through the airport, an individual would be checked by three to four different authorities including the police, the Air Force Intelligence, the Political Security Directorate and Military Intelligence, making it very difficult to avoid detection.
67. If a person was wanted for having evaded or deserted military service, the source considered that it would be difficult to bribe an officer to issue a passport as the officer in charge would risk being caught. This should be seen in light of the fact that previously 30-40 immigration officers had been fired for fabricating passports.
68. Regarding the situation of the route to the airport, the source said that the road to the airport was safe and under the control of the Syrian government, which was partly due to an agreement between the government and Jaysh Al-Islam.

## **Consequences of leaving illegally**

69. If a person left the country illegally and returned to Syria by his own will and showed his willingness to make amends with the regime, he could avoid a serious penalty by sorting out his affairs with for example the authority in his home area that had caused him problems with the authorities before he left.
70. According to the source, the law prescribing punishment for leaving the country illegally, could be circumvented by for example paying a bribe, using the right connections and/or showing one's loyalty by joining the NDF or the army.

## **Meeting with an international organization**

Beirut, 30 March 2017

## **Situation in government-controlled areas**

### **Military service**

71. Asked whether recruitment to the Syrian Army had been intensified within the previous twelve months, the international organisation stated that there had been an intensification compared to prior years. In June 2016, searching for conscripts, evaders and deserters was intensified for 15 days at checkpoints as well as at public places such as cafes etc. However, this intensified search was limited to those 15 days and similar active, targeted searches were not seen in other periods during the year. The reason behind the intensified search in June was that the army had called up 10,000 men for military conscription, but not many had reported for service.
72. According to the source, rules and procedures for military conscription were adhered to and recruitment did not take place randomly. Young men were obligated to join upon reaching the age of 18. Students were able to defer military service while they were studying.
73. Evaders and deserters would be caught if they approached a checkpoint. However, the source emphasized that the purpose of establishing checkpoints was not necessarily to catch evaders and deserters, but rather to control and prevent crime, smuggling of weapons, ammunition as well as checks for IEDs [improvised explosive device] and bombs, which had been on the increase in recent years.
74. The source assessed that it would be tremendously difficult for evaders and deserters to live in government-controlled areas for a long time as it was difficult to avoid checkpoints when moving around, and the person's identity and military service would also be revealed if he approached the authorities and asked for services or applied for documents.
75. Regarding consequences of evading military service when caught at the land border, the international organisation advised that the person would be kept for 12 hours after which he would be sent to military police in Damascus where he would be conscripted. However, the source pointed out that if the person carried necessary documents, e.g. military booklet in which postponement of military service due to study was mentioned, the person would not face any problem. It was added that a large number of Syrians left Syria to avoid doing military service.
76. As regards consequences of evasion or desertion for family members, the source advised that a person's act of evasion or desertion would not, in itself, have consequences for his family members. Nevertheless, it was added that families of high-profiled persons among opposition groups, for instance leaders of the FSA, would be closely monitored by the authorities. The source also knew of people in Damascus with relatives fighting in opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta who due to the activities of their relatives were

pressured to provide information about them when addressing themselves to the authorities, for example in connection with passport issuance.

77. Concerning the profile of reservists, the international organisation mentioned that it was not clear what the procedures for calling up of reservists were. To what degree reservists were called in seemed quite random and differed from area to area.
78. Regarding prevalence of persons over the age of 42 being drafted, the source had heard of cases where persons over the age of 42 had voluntarily joined the army or the NDF based on different motives, including economic incentives or because they had lost family members. In Damascus, Homs and Daraa, a number of fathers from families that had lost sons to the war had joined the army or the NDF.
79. According to the source, minors were not conscripted by the Syrian army, and the source had not heard of minors being part of the Syrian army during the course of the conflict.
80. Most deserters had fled into the opposition-controlled areas. According to the local agreements such as that entered into in Waer in Homs (March 2017), deserters were given six months to decide whether they would leave the area or stay to join either the NDF or the army. Fighters who did not leave the area for Idlib, handed over their arms to the Syrian army and had their status 'normalized' with the Syrian authorities. The source explained that the government aimed to encourage people to show support for the government and their forces. The source emphasized that the Syrian regime did not need manpower as they did before because they were increasingly supported by [the]Russians and [the]Iranians. What the government needed presently was safe areas throughout Syria and also to boost their position as the sole legitimate authority across the country, including in areas where it regained control.
81. When asked whether one at this stage in the conflict could find conscripts performing administrative or practical tasks rather than being sent to the frontline, the international organisation advised that conscripts were not able to influence the type of service they were to do and where it would take place. The government had recently become harder on corruption in the Syrian Army, making it more difficult for those with resources to influence their military service. The source knew of many rich families in Damascus who had sent their sons out of the country as the possibility of bribing one's way to better conditions during service or completely avoiding service was now more restricted. The source explained that the authorities had cracked down on corruption in the army to counter the impression that differential treatment occurred based on economic status and connections. The authorities wished to stress that all citizens were equal in terms of military service.

82. However, there were conscripts who performed other tasks than fighting, for instance standing guard or serving in customs, during their service.

### The NDF

83. According to the international organisation, recruitment to the NDF took place on a voluntary basis and people joined the force by their own will in order to protect their areas and as a means of earning an income. Additionally, the regime was more in need of the support of the local population than of manpower, which was the reason why the pro-regime forces did not use force towards people to join the NDF.
84. The source said that serving in an NDF militia was not an alternative to military conscription.
85. Asked whether social pressure played a role in making people to join the NDF, the source said that pressure from one's family and the local community certainly played a role. The source knew two cases of individuals who returned to Syria from Germany and Sweden for the purpose of joining the NDF and protecting their local Christian area from radicalized Islamic armed groups.
86. Concerning profiles of those recruited by the NDF, it was the source's understanding that everyone over the age of 18 could be recruited, and that no particular profile was evident among those recruited.
87. Regarding prevalence of minors in the NDF, the source advised that minors were not recruited to the NDF. The source explained that only persons over the age of 18 received salaries in the NDF, and there was, thus, no economic incentive for minors to join. The source knew of cases where minors from families with an only male child wanted to join the NDF, but their request was rejected and they were instead advised to support their families in other ways. In rural areas, there were examples of minors joining the NDF, however they were not active in combat. Asked whether minors experienced social or other kinds of pressure to join the forces, the source replied that one could not rule out the possibility of pressure from one's community to join. However, the source added that prevalence of social pressure would depend on the area and the situation.
88. Concerning recruitment of women to the NDF, the international organisation mentioned that there were women in the forces, but the number was not high. Women were not used as fighters, but were instead given tasks such as checking women at checkpoints etc. It was added that there were reports last month (February of 2017) that 200 women had



participated in the fighting in Deir Al-Zoor, but it was not clear whether they had been part of the Syrian Army or the NDF.

89. Generally, individuals residing in besieged areas or in close vicinity to battles, who were normally not recruited for combat operations, i.e. women, minors and only male children of a family, were sometimes allowed to participate in combat fighting in the face of imminent attacks.
90. According to the source, NDF forces were usually not present in city centres but rather in rural areas, far from where the Syrian Army was present.

### Public servants

91. The international organisation advised that public servants were certainly under pressure to join the army. However, the pressure was not such that someone would come to a ministry and tell the individual employees: “you and you should join”. Instead, recruitment to the army among public servants took place according to the same procedure through which other conscripts and reservists were called up, i.e. through a list of names sent to individual offices where conscripts and reservists worked. This meant that public servants were not called up because they were public servants or because they worked at a certain office, but rather as a result of their general duty as conscripts or reservists to join the army and based on a general call up. The source had not heard of a certain public workplace or office receiving a particular call to join the army. It was added that government employees who joined the army continued to receive their government salary during service.
92. Generally, government employees who did not comply with a call for conscription were registered officially as wanted for conscription and would be stopped at checkpoints. The source knew of government employees who in principle were wanted for military service but who had been able to continue working by avoiding passing through checkpoints or other places where one’s outstanding military status would be detected.
93. Asked whether public servants were forced to support the government through other types of activities than joining the army, the source replied that in the beginning of the conflict, public servants were forced to support the government for instance by participating in pro-regime demonstrations, however, those types of activities had not been taking place in the last five-six years.
94. Public servants had to obtain an authorization or clearance in order to leave the country, however, it was not difficult to obtain and most employees would be able to do so within a few hours. According to the source, a large number of public employees travelled now

and then to Lebanon for different reasons, for instance teachers travelling to Beirut in order to participate in workshops etc. If a public employee did not have authorization at the border, the authorities would hold him for two-three hours to check his identity with his workplace. Upon checking up on the person's identity and depending on clearance of his purpose of travel with immigration authorities, he would be permitted to leave the country.

95. The source added that individuals in sensitive positions, such as those employed in Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Defence, were not allowed to leave the country at all.
96. Government employees who were absent from their workplace for six months would lose their position.
97. Regarding whether civilians were coerced into supporting the army or other government forces for example with provisions or logistical support, the source said that there were no indications of that taking place. With regards to providing the authorities with information, the source explained that the authorities, like the security services, made use of an informant system. However, the source pointed out that various factors determined why some acted as informers: while some perhaps informed out of support for the government, others did so to stay well-connected or to avoid problems.

## **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

### **Recruitment to opposition groups**

98. The source said that in general, confirming information about the situation in opposition-controlled areas was difficult.
99. Ways of recruiting to opposition groups varied from place to place, as well as from group to group, according to the source. While the FSA did not use force to recruit people, the opposite was the case for jihadist Islamic groups such as Al-Nusra. Refusing to join jihadist groups like Al-Nusra was not an option and was considered to be equal to siding with the regime. The source emphasized that in the face of attacks from the Syrian government, armed groups, including the FSA, forced everyone to join them, which was currently what was happening in Idlib.
100. With regards to recruitment of women and children to armed opposition groups, the source said that generally the FSA did not recruit women or children. However, when under attack, everyone was forced to join the fight, including women and children. The

situation was more difficult with regards to jihadist groups. The source said that there was plenty of documentation of minors handling armour in videos from jihadist groups. Recently, an Al-Nusra leader used his own daughter as a suicide-bomber in connection with an attack against a police station. Jihadist groups had in some instances followed the tactics of ISIS which recruited minors. There were examples of minors participating in combat and in other support tasks within these groups.

101. Generally, to what extent civilians in an area controlled by jihadist groups were forced to join them also depended on the number of civilians living in that area; the more civilians, the less need to force people to join. The source referred to the situation in Ghouta, where opposition groups needed manpower and therefore heavily relied on forced recruitment of minors.

102. The source mentioned that two weeks earlier (March 2017), when some Islamic opposition groups took some prisoners during an operation in a suburb of Damascus, they told the prisoners that they could be released on the condition that they would join these groups and fight for them.

#### **Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support opposition groups**

103. Regarding the prevalence of civilians being pressured to support opposition groups with supporting tasks, the source said that civilians were forced to support opposition groups (i.e. all armed opposition groups including FSA) with tasks such as cooking, providing medical help etc. Refusing to help opposition groups with such tasks was not an option. The source explained that since minority groups had left areas controlled by opposition groups such as Al-Nusra, the remaining civilians were Sunnis who were forced to follow Islamic law and if they refused, they were accused of having left Islam. There were also reports of jihadists kidnapping people and forcing them to dig tunnels.

104. In instances where members of the FSA needed something, they would come and take it, however the source underlined that this did not happen on a daily basis.

#### **Prevalence of men avoiding active involvement in the armed conflict**

105. Asked about the extent to which one, at this stage of the conflict, found men capable of carrying arms who had been living in opposition-controlled areas for a longer period of time, and who had not been militarily active on the opposition side, the source replied that it was incredibly difficult to live in opposition-controlled areas without taking up arms and participate in fighting. The source referred to daily shellings and attacks in these areas and pointed out that not taking up arms in the face of such attacks was not considered likely. Men who stayed in the area had little other alternatives than to join the armed groups. The source explained that there were no longer any basic services being provided

for in these areas and therefore many people either fought for the groups or moved from these areas to government-controlled areas.

106. The international organisation added that there were also examples of men being forced by jihadist groups to kill someone, which made it impossible for them to leave the area as they could risk being subjected to revenge by relatives of the killed person or being arrested by authorities.

107. The source added that at this stage in the conflict, men from opposition-controlled areas risked being perceived by the regime as connected to an armed group opposing the government. The potential risk of being suspected of affiliation with the armed opposition groups made leaving an area under opposition control an unlikely option for many men. Individuals whom the regime suspected of having fought with the opposition, were sometimes taken to court or exposed in the media.

108. There were also cases of civilians not being allowed to leave opposition-controlled areas, although this was considered more common for groups consisting mainly of foreign fighters. There had also been some instances where opposition groups had destroyed Syrian ID-cards in order to force people to stay in their areas.

### **Treatment of public servants by the opposition groups**

109. The international organisation considered that in general, public employees did not face ill-treatment by the opposition groups simply because they had worked for and received salary from the government but the source stressed at the same time that treatment of public employees generally depended on the situation and the area in question.

110. In a number of areas controlled by the opposition, public employees worked for opposition groups and kept receiving salaries from the government. However, the source said that individuals who had had positions in security services, high-ranking military or government officials and high-ranking Bath party members could risk being ill-treated by the opposition groups if they for some reason were still in the area. For example, many policemen were killed by the opposition groups in the beginning of the conflict. Presently, however, a policeman would not face difficulties in staying in opposition-controlled areas if he changed sides and clearly declared that he was ready to work for the group controlling the area, according to the source.

111. Asked about possible consequences of a public employee refusing to cooperate with an opposition group controlling his area, the source advised that refusing to cooperate with a jihadist group was not an option and such a person was at risk of being jailed, particularly if his skills were considered replaceable. For certain categories of government employees,

such as doctors and nurses, the opposition groups had no intention to treat them in a way which made them leave the areas under their control as they needed their skills.

112. The source further said that those public employees who had remained in opposition-controlled areas were those who wanted to cooperate with opposition groups, and those who were against these groups had already left these areas in the beginning of the conflict.
113. According to the source, access to public services differed from area to area. While in the areas around Damascus controlled by the FSA, the public employees such as teachers continued doing their jobs and received their salaries from the government, in Homs students were allowed by the opposition groups to travel to institutions in government-controlled areas for exams
114. In order for public employees in rebel-held areas to continue receiving their salaries from the government, the government had started requiring these employees to send a copy of their national ID-card or make a phone call to prove that they were alive and in the area so that no salary was transferred to a person who was deceased or who had left the country.

#### **Issuance of documents by opposition groups**

115. A number of opposition groups, particularly the Islamic groups, issued their own ID documents, which were only valid in the areas under their control. ID cards issued by opposition groups had notations of which function an individual had had in the opposition-controlled area.
116. Due to lack of access to government offices in some areas such as Aleppo, the birth of a large number of children was not registered (in Aleppo 2000 children were unregistered). In areas regained by the Syrian government, many civilians were in need of valid documents which the Ministry of Interior was following up on.

#### **Civil documentation needed in Syria, for movement within Syria and for access to services**

117. For moving around in government-controlled areas in Syria, both men and women had to carry their own ID cards. In addition, men should also have military booklet or other documents proving their military service status.
118. As women and children had previously been used by the opposition groups to transport ammunition from one place to another, for instance in Al-Maydaan district in Damascus

governorate, everyone including women and children were thoroughly checked at checkpoints.

## **Exit from Syria**

### **Exiting Syria via Damascus Airport**

119. According to the source, since the beginning of the conflict, there had been only four-five security incidents on the 30 km. long road between Damascus city centre and the airport.

120. It was added that 80% of the route to the airport from Damascus was fully controlled by the Syrian Army while on the last 20% of the route, there were risks of clashes with opposition groups approximately five kilometres from the road on both sides. The source further said that if a security incident happened, the road would usually be blocked.

121. The source advised that inside the airport, there was only the usual border control like in any other airport, and the passengers did not have to go through any specific control procedure. The authorities present included the airport authorities, the security services and the immigration authorities. According to the source, people using the airport were normally people who did not have an issue with the government.

122. The source did not find it probable that an evader without documents or with false documents could bribe his way through the airport and leave the country. According to the source, there was corruption in Syria's institutions and it was not unheard that administrative handlings with the authorities took place more smoothly through bribery and good connections. However, it was the source's understanding that in Syria, the authorities did not take bribe to do illegal things, but rather to fix things in a legal way, thus the possibility to have access to services through bribe was limited. Against this background, it was not probable that a person could travel through the airport without necessary documents by paying a bribe to the airport authorities or other authorities present. The source added that people approaching the airport had usually ensured that they were in possession of proper documents and that their military service situation was cleared with the authorities.

### **Possible consequences of illegal exit**

123. The international organisation mentioned that in practice, no one would be punished merely because he or she had left Syria illegally given that a large number of people had left Syria illegally; something which the government itself admitted last year that it was aware of.

124. People who had left Syria illegally could contact the Syrian embassies abroad and have passports issued making it possible for them to return. The source underlined that if someone who had left the country illegally returned to Syria without going through the official procedures and obtaining necessary documents at a Syrian embassy, he would face difficulties with the authorities at the border upon return and he could be detained. The source considered that if an evader returned or was sent back to Syria without contacting an embassy first, he would be immediately drafted whilst he would be given a six months deadline to report for military service if his return was arranged through an embassy in advance.

## Meeting with professor Bassel Al-Hassan

Beirut, 3 April 2017

**About the source:** *The source is a Professor in Political Science at Lebanese University. The Professor is directly linked with people inside and outside of Syria on both sides of the Syrian conflict, i.e. Syrian opposition and activist groups as well as Syrian authorities, and he is also in contact with international organizations. He has been following the situation in Syria closely since the early uprising in 2011.*

## Situation in government-controlled areas

### Military service

125. The Syrian government continued its efforts to recruit conscripts and reservists intensively but recently there had been a change in its general mechanism of recruitment. Because of the ongoing war and the continued need for manpower, the Syrian government shifted its focus towards the civil structures in society as a way to boost its strained military capacity. Thus, the education system and other government institutions were increasingly serving as recruitment pools.
126. Professor Al-Hassan added that exemptions for e.g. medical reasons were also no longer strictly adhered to. Individuals who had previously been exempted for medical or mental conditions in some instances had undergone renewed medical, physical and mental assessments for the purpose of identifying individuals with minor medical issues who, despite of their prior exemptions, could be considered fit for either logistical or combat roles.
127. Generally, recruitment was now taking place within two major frameworks; on one hand the continuation of conscription for males between the ages of 18-42 and on the other hand the voluntary recruitment to pro-government forces such as the National Defence Forces (NDF).

128. According to the source, the military security service, the air intelligence service, military police as well as the general political security service were all authorities that followed up on recruitment to the government forces.

129. Pursuing conscripts, military service evaders and deserters took place in different ways: firstly, through check points that controlled the military status of men; secondly, through contact with the authorities, including administrative institutions that provided government services where individuals' status was also controlled; thirdly, through information provided by informers about the whereabouts of evaders.

### *Draft evaders and deserters*

130. According to the source, military trials were not used in practice for persons violating the military service law as was the case before the conflict, and generally evaders would immediately be drafted if they were caught. However, the source pointed out that consequences of evasion depended on whether the person had been actively fighting for or was connected to an opposition group. The authorities checked names of evaders in databases to determine if there was a match with names of suspected opposition fighters. An evader will be sent to military service, however evaders suspected of fighting for an opposition group, would face more severe consequences and be subject to a military trial. However, some evaders connected to opposition groups had entered into agreements with the regime in connection with its retaking of areas under opposition control. Such individuals would not be treated as members of terrorist groups and would under such an agreement typically be given the opportunity of enrolling into military service instead of facing a military trial.

131. Within the past three years the consequences for deserters had changed. During the early stages of the war (from 2011-2013), deserters were automatically considered as having joined an opposition group and repercussions were severe. Deserters caught by the authorities at this stage of the conflict were still automatically seen as having joined the opposition. However, deserters were at times able to enter in agreements with the authorities on the condition of subsequently re-entering military service. Amnesties towards deserters and evaders were regularly issued, making it possible for such persons to put down their arms and return to the army.

### *Reservists*

132. Previously, the age limit of reservists being called up to military service was 40, however that had changed and any person above the age of 40 was considered eligible for military service. Furthermore, the focus was no longer exclusively on reservists with particular qualifications.



133. Professor Al-Hassan considered that the regime had been less focused on recruiting reservists with certain qualifications because of the lack of unity in the army. There were commanders within the regime who had openly expressed their disagreement on recruitment strategies for reservists. The result was that several commanders adopted their own recruitment strategies, which resulted in unpredictable and chaotic recruitment patterns that were in themselves considered to constitute an exertion of pressure for potential reservists.
134. The authority to specify the upper age limit of men eligible for service in government forces had been entrusted to the provincial administration (*'Mohafaza'*), resulting in chaotic and inconsistent recruitment patterns throughout the country. The source made reference to circulars issued by different province governors determining which profiles and age limits to call up.

### *Recruitment of minors*

135. With regard to recruitment of minors, the source said that the government was not targeting minors to enlist in the army.

### *The NDF and the Fifth Corps*

136. With regards to recruitment to pro-government militias, the situation had recently changed due to the establishment of the Fifth Corps (in November of 2016). The purpose of establishing the Fifth Corps was to mobilize and integrate all recruits volunteering to defend the regime and in the long run to create a force that could ensure stability and security in Syria by creating links with neighbouring countries. According to the source, the Fifth Corps had been established to replace the NDF, but was still in the process of being formed. While the structure of the NDF did no longer exist, the groups previously designated as operating under the umbrella of the NDF were now either operating under the Fifth Corps or operating independently.
137. In terms of recruitment, there were reports of public servants between the ages of 18-57 being enlisted under the Fifth Corps, but there was no centralized determination by the government of which age group was considered eligible to serve within the ranks of the Fifth Corps. Instead, it was the prerogative of each provincial administration (*'Mohafaza'*) to decide which age group was eligible to enlist under the Fifth Corps. For instance, the governorate of Latakia had called for males between the ages of 18-50 to enlist except for those with deferrals or exemptions while on the same day the governorate of Damascus issued a circular urging all males between the ages of 18 and 57 to enlist.

138. In order to make enlistment to the Fifth Corps more appealing, recruits were offered better conditions with regard to training and instruction than in the army before being deployed.

139. The Fifth Corps did not exclusively consist of volunteers stemming from the NDF. The regime had in some instances conscripted individuals whom the regime viewed as having dubious political sympathies to serve in the Fifth Corps. The regime recruited them to the Fifth Corps, instead of to regular military service, and allowed them to serve in their local areas, which was considered a more convenient way to keep unwilling conscripts in the ranks of governments and preventing them from turning against the regime.

#### ***Recruitment of minors to the NDF***

140. Minors between the ages of 14-16 were subjected to ideological propaganda which pushed them to volunteer themselves to assist pro-government militias. There were examples of minors volunteering in paramilitary groups in combat or combat support roles and depending on their combating capacity, they would either be expected to help with logistical support or with combat on battlefronts. The spoils of the war made available in connection with militias' activities generally also incentivized young men to join the militias.

#### ***Civilian support to the Syrian Army or pro-government militias***

141. Regarding the prevalence of pressuring civilians to support the army or pro-regime militia groups by providing for instance shelter, food or information, Professor Al-Hassan explained that this depended on the area in question. There were areas, where the regime had always been in need for such assistance and where there had been instances of pressuring or forcing civilians to cooperate with the regime in the abovementioned ways. However, in certain areas that were known to be favouring the regime, it would be unlikely for the regime to exert such pressure. Those who did not comply with a request to assist the authorities were at risk of being labelled as traitors and would be treated thereafter.

#### ***Government employees***

142. A certain percentage of government employees were expected to join the Fifth Corps and there had been circulars issued by the Health Department entrusting governorates with the authority to recruit those assessed to be suitable. The exact number of recruits was balanced against the total number of employees within each state department, but government employees already showing their loyalty to the regime, for instance through active involvement in the Baath party, were exempted. The age limit for those considered eligible for enlistment was higher than for regular conscription with the army.

#### ***Travel restrictions on public employees***

143. Generally, government employees at all levels, including lower level staff such as teachers and drivers, were required to obtain authorization to be able to leave the country. The source considered that authorization was given in cases of family emergencies to individuals who had served in the government forces and had proved their loyalty and willingness to serve the Syrian regime. Certain categories of government employees, such as employees working in the oil sector, for the cabinet or for the president, would rarely be granted an authorization to leave.
144. Abandonment of a government position without prior notice would lead to consequences prescribed by civil law, which included termination of salary and upon return to the place of work, a requirement to make up for time away from the place of work. However, since the regime was interested in keeping its supporters, there would be a willingness to make compromises in certain cases.
145. If an employee had left the country without authorization from his place of work, that person would face an investigation upon return in order to uncover the reasons for having left the country without authorization. Depending on the outcome, there would be attempts to reach a compromise to facilitate that person's return to his place of work.

## **Situation in the opposition-controlled areas**

### **Recruitment by opposition groups**

146. Professor Al-Hassan explained that the pattern of recruitment to the opposition groups varied dependent on the group, the region, the ideology in question as well as on the level of financial means available to the group. Generally, all warring parties increasingly recruited their fighters on the basis of ethnic and religious motives due to the escalating sectarianism. Particularly religious extremist groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra relied heavily in their recruitment on a religious, sectarian and ideological propaganda. According to Professor Al-Hassan, Jabhat Al-Nusra had a more systematic way of recruiting and had created registers with names of individuals the group wanted to recruit.
147. Regarding prevalence of recruitment of minors to opposition groups, Professor Al-Hassan said that many children were fighting in the ranks of opposition groups, particularly jihadist groups like Jabhat Al-Nusra who recruited boys as young as eight years old, and deployed them to the battlefield as soon as they were assessed to be capable of fighting.
148. There were reports of women recruited by opposition forces to undertake very specific roles, such as searching women at checkpoints, however they were not used in combat roles. Professor Al-Hassan had also heard of cases, where women were used by the opposition groups for special tasks, for instance infiltrating the government forces. An

example of such cases was a woman who, wanting to avenge the deaths of her brothers, joined Jabhat Al-Nusra and infiltrated members of the Syrian regime by offering sexual favours. She was killed by the regime as soon as they found out that she had operated as a spy for an opposition group. The source added that among groups not affiliated with the Syrian regime, it was only Kurds who used women as fighters.

### **Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support opposition groups**

149. Whether civilians were involved in providing a support infrastructure to opposition groups, depended on the local dynamics in the area, i.e. the residents' relationship with the local militias.
150. Fighters originating from the area where they were fighting were generally perceived to be protecting the population and therefore supported by the local people. Members of ethnic and religious minorities living in opposition-controlled areas, were mostly complying with any demand in order to remain safe and avoid possible repercussions of not being perceived to be supportive.

### **Treatment of public servants by the opposition groups**

151. The conflicting parties in Syria relied heavily on support from the population in the areas under their control and after gaining control of an area, they would go a long way to earn the support of the locals, including from individuals previously employed with the government.
152. However, when faced with individuals suspected of not being faithful to an opposition group, the consequences were harsh. Since opposition groups did not have the same capacity as the regime in terms of punishing its citizens by withholding crucial services, opposition groups often relied on more violent methods in punishing those whom they perceived as their opponents.
153. The source considered that government employees who openly stated that the reason for refusing to work for the opposition groups was their allegiance with the Syrian regime risked being killed.

### **Meeting with UNHCR, Office of the MENA Director in Amman, Jordan**

Amman, Jordan, 29 March 2017

The following information was provided by UNHCR on the basis of information available from various sources. The original sources and additional information on the topics covered in this meeting note can be found at: UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Syria: "Illegal*

*Exit" from Syria and Related Issues for Determining the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Syria*, February 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58da824d4.html>.

## **Military service**

154. When asked about the prevalence of general mobilization within the last 12 months the source said that to their knowledge there had not been a public statement from the president as the commander in chief announcing a nation-wide call for mobilization. However, in principle, the usual recruitment procedures were still in place. There had been waves of intensified efforts to recruit reservists and conscripts to the army, including at mobile and fixed checkpoints and raids in public spaces such as cafés, shops, buses. There was a rise in targeting of certain groups, which were previously considered as 'protected' with regards to serving military service, i.e. prisoners, university students, public servants and to some extent also certain religious minorities.
155. In areas under government control, it was not easy to avoid checkpoints, and men of fighting age were doing everything possible to avoid enlistment, including staying at home or taking detours or other precautions to avoid checkpoints.
156. The source said that there were anecdotal reports of recruitment of minors in the army, but there did not seem to be a policy aimed at enlisting minors. It was rather a matter of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, there had been reports of cases of minors appearing to be 18 years of age who were subjected to harassment and questioned about conscription at checkpoints. There had also been cases of minors appearing to be 18 of age or older who had been taken at checkpoints, but usually released again after the families had contacted relevant authorities, although this may not always prove swift and easy in practice.
157. There were reports of persons over the age of 42 being conscripted to the army and it had generally involved qualified personnel with a specific expertise. The source explained that it was unclear whether the age limit had been raised as part of a government policy or if it was instead happening on a case by case basis. The source considered that lower-level commanders had been given more authority due to increasing decentralization and it therefore may have been on a more local level that commanders had deviated from existing regulations regarding age limit.
158. Reservists who were over the age of 42 were usually those with certain specialities such as pilots, who were drafted even after turning 42.
159. Asked whether one could find conscripts who did other tasks (administration, guarding etc.) than being sent to the frontline during their military service, the source replied that it

was unclear to what extent this was possible. There were reports that Sunnis were not sent to the frontline as the government did not trust them, however these reports should be considered against the backdrop that Sunni men in fact constituted the majority of the Syrian army.

### *Corruption in the Syrian Army*

160. It was unclear to what extent a conscript could influence his service by bribing officers to avoid frontline service. Corruption had in general increased since the onset of the war, however, at the same time, there were reports that the government had intensified efforts to crack down on corruption in the army.

### *Draft evaders and deserters*

161. Punishment for draft evasion is regulated under the law, however punishments are administered without due process of law. In practice, draft evasion would usually entail arrest and detention for varying periods of time before being deployed to one's unit/ the front line after limited, if any, military training. During detention, evaders were reportedly at risk of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, especially in cases where evasion was considered a political statement against the government.
162. The source considered that evasion and desertion would usually be considered as an expression of political dissent and the consequences for such an act would go beyond prosecution as prescribed by law. Deserters would be subject to ad hoc decisions, not necessarily with a trial in court, on which punishment to receive. Deserters caught near a battle would likely be executed on the spot or detained for uncertain periods of time during which deserters would likely be subjected to torture and ill-treatment.
163. Regarding pursuing those who have evaded or deserted from service, the Syrian government continues to conduct house searches and raids in public areas in areas under its control, taking those who cannot prove an exemption or deferral from military service duties. It is unclear how far the government would pursue wanted persons individually. Certainly, individuals who had evaded or deserted are a prime target during arrest campaigns and raids and their military status is regularly checked at checkpoints, border crossings or when otherwise interacting with government authorities.
164. Regarding the possibility of living in government-controlled areas for a long time as an evader or a deserter, the source found the conditions for a person hiding in government-controlled areas to be very difficult, with almost no freedom of movement, no access to government services and with a constant risk of being taken at mobile and/or fixed checkpoints or during raids. The source explained that as a direct result of men's restricted movement out of fear of conscription for example, the role of women had become

increasingly important as heads of households and bread-winners in present-day Syria. As it had become increasingly difficult to leave the country, many evaders found themselves living in hiding, avoiding checkpoints, moving to remote areas or even to opposition-controlled areas, according to reports. In areas that had previously been under opposition control and retaken by the government, there were reports of men being arrested, having disappeared or directly being conscripted into the military.

165. The government had reportedly pressured family members to force military-age men to report for military service.

166. Reports indicate that family members of deserters face a higher risk of being targeted. There had been cases of specifically targeting families of high-profile deserters, however, according to the source the government had also pressured and punished family members of 'ordinary' evaders or deserters.

### The NDF

167. Regarding whether it was possible for those serving in the NDF to avoid conscription to the Syrian Army, the source said that it was unclear whether such an arrangement was feasible.

168. According to the source, joining the NDF was seen by many as the preferred option to that of the Syrian Army given that the NDF was generally viewed as having grown out of a community and established to provide protection of the community. There was thus a willingness at a local level to join the NDF to ensure that ones' neighbourhood was not run over by anti-government/jihadist groups.

169. In addition, enlisting in an NDF militia was a preferable option for many due to incentives such as the perspectives of getting a better salary, usually serving in the home area and of benefitting in other ways. There had been reports of NDF members being permitted by the government to use their positions as a *carte blanche* for looting, blackmailing or taking bribes.

170. The source also found that given that NDF groups were often set up along ethnic and religious affiliations, and members of certain minority religious and ethnic groups preferred to join these militias depending on the area. However, for instance in Aleppo, Sunni Arabs comprised a large percentage of the NDF.

171. The source had no information as to the prevalence of social pressure exerted on individuals to join the NDF, but did not rule out this possibility.

## Prevalence of pressuring civilians to support the pro-regime forces with certain tasks

172. Regarding the prevalence of pressuring civilians to support the Syrian Army or pro-regime militia groups with assistance, such as food, or shelter, the source considered that this could well have taken place, however the extent is not known to the source. For example in 2013, when faced with threats of US air strikes after the chemical attacks on Ghouta, it was reported that the military/security moved into private houses presuming certain military/security facilities would be targeted in the event of strikes. The source considered that on a local level, it was possible that civilians might be forced to provide certain assistance to the military. The source assessed that refusing to assist government forces in the face of a military attack would be considered as an expression of political dissent.
173. Pressuring civilians to provide information to the army or pro-regime militias was a well-known tactic used by the Syrian authorities even before the war. Reports describe that the Syrian security and intelligence services have a long history of recruiting people to inform them about activities in their immediate area, including people working at hotels, taxi-drivers, street cleaners etc. This practice continued during the conflict and it is considered likely that pressure to provide information has further intensified with the greater need for security-related information. The source considered that citizens could be pressured into acting as informants and that refusing to cooperate would likely be perceived as an expression of an anti-government view.

## Government employees

174. Generally, government employees from all branches of the public sector were expected to serve with the military and a decree had been issued stating that having fulfilled one's military service was a precondition for being employed with the government. Based on a presidential decree issued in August 2014 (Decree No. 33 of 2014), a civil servants' employment will be terminated if they fail to fulfil their military obligations. Presidential decree (Law No. 14 of 20 July 2016) stipulates that if a civil servant reports for military service within 30 days of receiving the notification of his employment termination, he will be placed on special leave without pay (in the case of mandatory military service) and leave with pay (in the case of reservist service), respectively, for the period of absence.<sup>218</sup> The source underlined that it had no details regarding the implementation of the decree in practice.

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<sup>218</sup> See Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), *Law Issued on Cancelling Decision of Terminating Employment of State Workers Should They Join Military Service*, 20 July 2016, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=83067>; SANA, *President al-Assad Issues Legislative Decree Amending Mandatory Military Service Law*, 6 August 2014, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=9155>. See UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Syria: "Illegal Exit" from Syria and Related Issues for Determining the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Syria*, February 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58da824d4.html>, footnote 130).



175. However, the source considered that employees in critical government positions might not be asked to do their military service while government employees aged 42 or over should in principle no longer be required to serve. The number of people already absent from the workplace may also be taken into consideration when calling government employees for military service. The source had no information if particular categories of civil servants had been recruited to a greater extent than others.
176. The source assessed that drives of intensified recruitment would likely be balanced against other critical needs such as the continued functioning of the public administration. However, the source pointed out that before the war, the public sector in Syria was highly inflated and employed a significant percentage of the workforce.
177. The exact consequences for civil servants of not complying with an order to serve in the military are difficult to determine and would likely depend on the individual profile of the person. Applicable laws foresee various punishments depending on the circumstances of the case (see Decree No. 33 of 2014 and the 1950 Military Penal Code, as amended in 1973). However, as with other draft evaders, a civil servant's refusal to serve would likely be perceived as taking a political view against the government and thus result in the above-described consequences for draft evaders.
178. Instances of coercing civil servants to participate in pro-regime demonstrations were reported in the beginning of the conflict in 2011, but nothing of that sort had been seen since, according to the source's knowledge.

### *Travel restrictions*

179. Generally, civil servants are required by law to obtain authorization from their respective ministry before leaving the country. Their rank/position determines how difficult it would be to obtain an authorization. High-ranking officials are more likely to be denied authorization to travel than lower level public servants. However, the authorization would be assessed against the reason for wanting to travel. Generally, military career personnel would likely not be able to obtain authorization to travel under the current circumstances. Men between the ages of 18 and 42 (military age) are required to have a travel authorization from the recruitment office.
180. The source found that it was difficult to assess the consequences of leaving the country without the required travel authorization. Generally, the fact that an individual abandoned his/her post and left the country without prior authorization may raise suspicion upon his/her return to Syria, among other elements (see below "*Treatment upon Return to Syria*")

## Exiting Syria

181. For leaving through the airport, a person has to be in possession of his/her passport. For those crossing the land border to Lebanon, the ID card would be sufficient. Men of military age would be rigorously checked upon departure on their status with regards to compulsory/reservist service (mainly on the basis of electronic database and travel authorization letter).

## *Consequences of illegal exit from Syria*

182. Leaving Syria illegally, i.e. without a valid passport/ID card or without the required travel authorization or through an unauthorized departure point is in principle subject to imprisonment and/or fines based on the applicable law (Law No. 18 of 2014). However, in the context of the conflict in Syria, laws are reported to be implemented in an arbitrary and unpredictable manner.

183. The source considered that consequences for exiting Syria illegally should not be viewed in isolation but as one of potentially several risk factors. The context of the conflict in Syria and the general arbitrariness of how laws were implemented adds to the picture.

## Treatment upon Return to Syria

184. Those returning to Syria may be faced with suspicion on account of several factors, including illegal exit, having family members wanted by the authorities, not having completed military service, originating from an area under opposition control or general appearance (e.g. people who appear to be religious based on their dress). Generally, the source assessed that it required very little to raise the authorities' suspicion when returning from abroad. For instance, to be returned to Damascus airport directly from Europe could be enough to raise suspicion with the authorities. Before the war, several cases were reported of Syrians facing severe repercussions such as arbitrary arrest and disappearance after being forcefully returned to Damascus airport from Europe. The returnees had often been returned after lodging a failed asylum claim in Europe, which the government considered an act of tainting its image.

185. Since the outbreak of the war, information on how Syrians returning to Syria are treated is scarce. However, there are indications suggesting that if someone returned from Europe to Syria, factors such as lack of authorization to leave the country, one's place of origin (if originating from an area under opposition control), possible activities while abroad, or relatives (perceived to be) involved with the opposition, would raise suspicion from the authorities about the individual. Political activities in this connection should be understood to be anything ranging from Facebook activism to traditional political activities.

## Meeting with a major international non-governmental organization operating in Syria

Beirut, 3. April 2017

### Situation in government-controlled areas

#### Military service

##### *Intensification of recruitment to the army*

186. The source said that the Syrian government continued to recruit conscripts to the army through mandatory military service. The most important recent development with regard to recruitment to the army as of late was the signing of reconciliation agreements in areas recently retaken by government forces. These areas provided a base for conscription and were where the most significant efforts to recruit to the government forces took place, according to the source.
187. The source explained that in the agreements that were made between opposition groups and the government, men between the ages of 18-45 who chose not to leave for opposition-controlled Idlib, were obliged to sign up for service in order to 'reconcile' or 'normalize' their status with the authorities. Men who had registered with the authorities would receive a piece of paper saying that they were to report to a given authority within six months. Agreements differed from area to area, and in some examples, there were alternate options to army service. In connection with the agreement in Al-Tell, a besieged suburb of Damascus, men had been given the option of joining the Republican Guard and fight in Eastern Ghouta for a year or serve in the police force for eight years. Those who did not agree to one of these options were not given the option to go to Idlib, and they would be arrested. According to the source, options offered in these agreements depended among other things on which government force had regained the area in question. As the country was in a situation of war and the internal coordination in the army had weakened, each section of the army recapturing an area tried to recruit conscripts among the surrendered opposition to its own ranks, for instance the Republican Guard in the mentioned example tried to recruit conscripts to its own ranks.
188. Essentially men of military service age who had not completed their mandatory service were targeted for recruitment in areas recently taken over by the government. In areas recently 'reconciled' with the government, there were many men who had never reported for military service and evasion of service was one of the reasons why they had come to the areas in the first place. Many hoped that the agreement, which was presented as a

sort of reconciliation or normalization, would allow them to acquire valid civil documentation which many lacked after years of conflict, according to the source.

189. According to the source, students studying at master's degree level were still able to defer their military service, but according to a decree issued two days earlier (1 April 2017), students at Diploma level were no longer able to do so. The source could, however, not refer to a link to the decree.

#### *Recruitment of minors and persons over 42*

190. The source said that the Syrian Army was not recruiting minors to its ranks and that the age of conscription remained 18 years.

191. Generally, the age limit of recruits to the army was 42, however, agreements that had been made in areas recently taken over by the government showed that the age scope of people recruited for the army had been widened to include men up until at least the age of 45.

#### *Reservists*

192. Regarding reservists, the regime recruited reservists according to the army's need for particular skills. Reservists who had previously served with the Syrian Air Defence Forces would be recruited again. Men who had completed their military service as ordinary conscripts and who had no special qualifications were not called up for service even in areas recaptured by the government.

#### *Prevalence of military conscripts in the Syrian Army who were not involved in armed conflict*

193. With regard to the extent of conscripts' involvement in combat activities in the Syrian Army, the source drew attention to the fact that the army had not served on the frontlines to any great extent throughout much of the conflict. The main reason behind this was that a majority of units in the army were not capable of fighting, and fighting on the frontlines had to a large extent been limited to a handful of units, such as the Fourth Armored Division and the Republican Guard and other special troops. The army had therefore more or less functioned as more of a logistical hub for operational activities.
194. Additionally, engagement in combat activities also depended on where a conscript was serving. Many areas were not characterized by a lot of fighting, and some conscripts were tasked with building roads and digging holes, while others had an administrative, support function within the army organization. Whether conscripts themselves were able to influence where they could serve and under which functions depended also partly on conscripts' background, according to the source. The source considered that men

conscripted from areas recently under opposition control would be used as cannon fodder or in the fight against the ISIS.

### *Prevalence of corruption in the Syrian Army*

195. With regard to influencing one's position while in service, the source considered that bribing of officers with large sums of money was possible. However, at the current stage of the conflict everyone was broke, and if an individual had the sums needed, he would more likely attempt to leave Syria rather than use his money to bribe an officer to better circumstances while serving the army, according to the source. The source further said that officers in the army usually demanded a lot of money, and it was only a small group of wealthy people in Damascus and people with relatives abroad who could afford paying such high bribes.

### *Draft evaders and deserters*

196. The source said that in general, men of military service age in government-controlled areas who had not served the army faced the risk of arrest at checkpoints.

197. Evaders of military service who were caught at checkpoints would immediately be sent to conscription.

198. Deserters from the military service faced more severe consequences and could risk being shot as a consequence of their act.

199. With regard to consequences for family members to evaders and deserters, the source considered that generally families to deserters were more likely to have been put under pressure from the authorities. There were examples of family members to deserted officers who had been kidnapped at checkpoints.

200. Generally, checkpoints were the government's main avenue for apprehension of deserters and evaders, and due to the fact that there were so many checkpoints, the authorities did not need to do much else in the effort to pursue those wanted. While some checkpoints were very rudimentary, others were very established. However, even those checkpoints which were not very technically sophisticated were able to effectively control the men who wished to pass through. For instance, those manning the checkpoints typically sent a picture of the name and of the ID of the individual in question by cell phone to the controlling authority, and was able to receive notice shortly after.

201. The source considered that generally, evaders and deserters could stay in areas under government control only under very restricted conditions. Such individuals would have to

avoid all checkpoints and avoid any contact with authorities. Whether or not he could keep up a job, would depend on whether there were checks on the way to work.

### **The National Defence Forces (NDF)**

202. The source said that the NDF did not forcibly recruit its members and considered that those who enlisted did so voluntarily. NDF militias were primarily local groups, some of them controlled by wealthy businessmen, and its members often closely acquainted and it was therefore not necessary to use force or pressure people to join. Since NDF militias were fighting at frontlines, being a member of the NDF entailed higher risks. Individuals joining the ranks of the NDF therefore received higher salaries as a reward for the risks taken while serving with the NDF. Another incentive for men to join the ranks of the NDF was the benefits of additional income through looting as well as by extortion at checkpoint duty for example. For some, enlisting in the NDF had been an alternative to mandatory military service. Men were given a special security card that would enable them to prove to the authorities that they were serving a pro-government militia under the NDF and therefore were not obligated to serve in the army. However, the relationship with government forces was far from regulated and there were examples of confrontations between soldiers in the Syrian army and the NDF. For example, there arose confrontations between the government and NDF in the city of Homs in summer 2015 where they fought over smuggling lines in Waer. These confrontations took place at least once every two months throughout 2016.

203. Regarding recruitment of minors, the source said that he had heard of 16 year olds serving in the NDF in Homs. According to the source, if you were 15-16 years old in Homs, the salary from the NDF would be the best income you could get.

204. Women increasingly figured in specific NDF militias in recent years, for instance there was a women's unit in Damascus, although it was still considered rare to find such units in the NDF. Women were neither forced nor pressured to join the NDF; they volunteered for service in the NDF, partly motivated by economic incentives.

### **The Fifth Corps**

205. Regarding the recent establishment of a Fifth Corps, the source explained that this began as a project driven by Russian initiative partly due to the fact that almost all NDF units were influenced heavily by Iranians, either Hezbollah or IRGC. It was thus the intention that the Fifth Corps was to be centralized under the command of the Syrian Army to a much larger extent than had been the case with the militias organized under the umbrella of the NDF. The units under the Corps were intended for command and control outside of home areas.

206. How effective the Corps would prove to be, remained to be seen, however, some troops had already been active in Palmyra as well as on other front lines. According to the source, it was difficult to ascertain whether the aim of countering the NDF had been successful and he considered that the most likely outcome would be that the NDF would continue to exist and function as before with outside influence and support.
207. In terms of recruitment, the Syrian government had been campaigning for enrolment in the Fifth Corps through papers in universities and at government work places and schools etc. Salaries for members were considered good by Syrian standards, approximately 100-200 USD/month. The corps was mainly meant to be a voluntary corps, but men of military service age could also be conscripted. The source considered that university students who had been able to defer their military service in the Syrian Army made up a group that the government would target for recruitment to the Fifth Corps.
208. Regarding the age of those being recruited, the source said that in the Fifth Corps, one could find men who were older than 42, even up to 52, depending on their health condition.

#### Civilian support to the army or pro-government groups

209. On the question of whether civilians in government-controlled areas were coerced into providing support to the army or pro-government militias, the source said that pressuring civilians to support pro-regime forces including the army was not a policy, and the army or militias were not systematically asking civilians to support them logistically or with food or shelter. However, depending on the circumstances and local dynamics, such occurrences could not be excluded. On the other hand, the government forces had the authority to take what it needed, and there were examples of the army confiscating wells and appropriating property belonging to civilians. Not complying with such demands was not considered an option for individuals, and consequences for refusing to comply were considered extreme.
210. Regarding whether civilians were forced to assist the army with information, the source explained that before the war one out of six Syrians was on the payroll of the security services ('Mukhabarat'), but after the outbreak of the war there was a higher prevalence of coercing civilians to become informers. The many security branches were particularly reliant on informants and informers were found throughout society, both those who were getting paid and others who were coerced into the task of informing. While the security branches were making use of informers systematically, the army had, however, not systematically made use of informers, according to the source.

211. Regarding consequences of refusing to provide information, the source explained that it was not an option and individuals suspected of hiding information, were suspected of being terrorists and that this was especially the case with regards to individuals from 'reconciled' areas, i.e. areas recently taken over by government forces.

### **Government employees**

212. Government employees had, up until about a year ago, been able to fulfil their mandatory military service whilst in their government position unless they had qualifications which the army was in need of. Many employees had also been able to defer their service for a long period of time. This option had now been annulled, and therefore there were many government employees who were obligated to conscript for military service.

### **Travel restrictions**

213. Generally, government employees needed authorization in order to be able to travel outside of Syria. There were some categories of employees in sensitive positions who were unable to obtain the necessary authorization due to the nature of the work they had, e.g. employees of the national museum. The source considered that teachers relatively easily were able to obtain an authorization to travel, while whether or not a doctor would be able to get the necessary authorization, depended on where he or she worked.

214. For employees who left their government position without giving notice, the consequences would be dependent on which position an individual abandoned and for what reasons. Government employees in sensitive positions would be suspected of providing foreign powers with information while others would be tried before an economic court and would receive a heavy fine. A teacher who left his job without notice would lose his employment and the benefits that came with it, and he would possibly be fined as well. The source noted that there were teachers living in areas outside of the government's control that had retained their monthly salaries from the government, on the condition that they did not work for the rebels in the area.

### **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

#### **Recruitment to opposition groups**

215. Civilians living in areas outside of the government's control were very poor, and with lack of revenues of income, becoming a fighter in an armed group was one of the few avenues for cash for many men. Many were therefore willingly joining armed groups, according to the source. Some joined groups temporarily, for example for a specific offensive or a specific task.

216. The source further said that there were some groups such as Al-Nusra who only trusted and recruited persons whom they knew and whose families were known to them.



217. With regard to whether men were pressured into armed opposition groups, the source said that many were volunteering to fight and groups were generally not lacking manpower. Additionally, they seldom had the resources to support a large number of members. However, the economic necessity, i.e. to be able to provide for oneself and one's family, pressured people to join. Not joining would thus be tantamount to saying no to an income, according to the source.

### **Prevalence of men capable of carrying arms who had joined the opposition groups**

218. The source added that there were many young men in rebel-held areas, capable of carrying arms that did not join the armed groups. In 2012, many joined the armed groups out of ideological conviction and a belief in the cause of the insurrection, however in the current state of affairs with groups having become increasingly radicalized and corrupt and the economic situation increasingly dire, many just wanted to be able to feed themselves.

### **Recruitment of minors**

219. With regard to minors, the source said that there were examples of minors who had voluntarily joined armed groups and even participated in fighting, while in other cases, minors had joined in accordance with their parents' wishes. Which activities minors carried out in the groups, depended on their age. The usual age of minors being used as fighters were 14-15, however children as young as 8 had been reported as ammunition runners. There were cases where all male members of a family had joined and fought for opposition groups.

### **Recruitment of women**

220. Women were not recruited to opposition groups, according to the source.

### **Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support**

221. According to the source, jihadist groups pressured civilians to support them with shelters, food and information, and if somebody refused to provide such support, he would most likely stand trial in a Sharia court.

### **Treatment of government employees by the opposition groups**

222. In general, people who held positions in the government's security apparatus had left the areas which came under the control of opposition groups. Other government employees stayed in their local areas and some still received salaries by the government. With the exception of Jabhat Al-Nusra, who did not tolerate government employees continuing to receive salaries from the regime as it was considered equal to taking money from the 'infidels' (kuffar), they were generally not ill-treated by groups opposing the regime. There were two main reasons behind this: first of all, there was an obvious incentive for groups

in control of sustaining economic activity in the areas which would be curbed if local groups prohibited people from receiving an income from the government. Secondly, the Syrian government had been and was still the main employer of Syrians and therefore to view government employees as pro-government would practically have entailed punishing a large percentage of the population of those areas.

## **Meeting with Lama Fakih, Human Rights Watch**

Beirut, 28 March 2017

### **Situation in government-controlled areas**

#### **Military service in government-controlled areas**

223. Lama Fakih, Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division, said that military service continued to be mandatory in Syria and individuals were called back even after having completed their service. There were reports of men living more or less in hiding in government-controlled areas to avoid being drafted for service. She had heard a story of a family, where the husband worked at home as a seamstress, while the wife was the person in the household who had to leave the house for different errands. On one errand she was confronted by a security force member who asked why her husband was not doing the errands, where was he? She was forced to reveal he was at home, and [he] was then taken in to serve.

224. Those who were recruited for military service were rarely able to take leave from service to go home for visits. With regard to intensified efforts to mobilize the population for service, HRW had not received reports of the government having conducted widespread raids in the last twelve months. However, men of military service age were generally fearful of going out in public due to risks of being confronted at checkpoints and being taken in for service.

#### ***Recruitment of minors or individuals over the age of 42***

225. The age scope of men who were called up for service seemed to have been widened. There was anecdotal information regarding men in their forties, up to mid-forties, who had already completed their service many years ago, but who were called back into service. Whether these were individuals of a particular profile, i.e. with certain qualifications, was difficult to say due to the limited information available on this subject.

226. Recruitment of minors to the Syrian Arab Army had not been documented by HRW, however that this could not be entirely excluded.

#### ***Corruption in the Syrian Arab Army***

227. The source said that historically, corruption had always played a role in the Syrian army. The more affluent a person was, the more he would be able to influence place of service and duties.

### *Draft evaders and deserters*

228. Consequences for evasion would include immediate enrolment into service or detention. Deserters faced more severe consequences and would likely be imprisoned or killed. The authorities had continually used relatives as pressure points with the aim of getting deserters to turn themselves in.

### **The NDF**

229. Lama Fakih, HRW, said that to her knowledge enrolment in the NDF had been voluntary and the source had not heard reports of forced recruitment to the forces. The NDF had been incentivizing people to join their ranks by offering salaries and the option to serve in local areas. What role social pressure played in this regard was difficult to say and would be very dependent on local circumstances.

230. It was difficult to say to what degree minors were enrolled in the NDF, due to the limited access to government-held territories where they operated.

231. Regarding recruitment of women, the source said that women had volunteered in the NDF. Women did not participate in combat to her knowledge and they took on tasks at checkpoints such as body search of other women, translation, screening, etc. The source added that serving the NDF was an important avenue of earning an income.

232. Generally, the NDF did not have a good reputation e.g. due to militias' involvement in looting of homes which people had fled from in connection with incursions. However, in some areas they were respected. The NDF had been involved in frontline combat, and also provided security in many local areas, with tasks such as manning checkpoints.

233. With regards to whether civilians had been forced to assist or support the NDF, the source considered that, for example if a checkpoint were set up in front of one's house, those manning it would expect liberties such as using one's house for bathroom purposes for example. Or if an individual ran a shop next to the checkpoint, he was expected to allow the forces to take goods from the shop. Individual civilians would not have any option but to give in to such demands.

### **Government employees**

234. There were anecdotal reports of teachers being asked to inform on students that were not sympathetic towards the government. There were reports of doctors having been

hindered in performing critical medical procedures on persons considered of anti-government loyalty. The source considered that such practices were indicative of pressure being more acute in some government institutions. However, the pressure was more broadly prevalent and the source said that it would be difficult for anyone to refuse to comply in partaking in activities that the government requested for fear of the consequences.

### ***Travel restrictions***

235. Public servants were restricted from travelling abroad and government employees had to have an authorization in order to be allowed to leave the country. Some were not given the authorization to leave, however it was difficult to give a consistent picture of the practice. For example, there had been examples of teachers not being allowed to leave, while other teachers had been able to obtain authorization and leave.

## **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

### **Recruitment in opposition-controlled areas**

236. Lama Fakih, HRW had not heard of cases of forced recruitment by opposition groups similar to those practiced by the government. There were incentives to join the opposition groups, in lack of better alternatives, as well as an amount of social pressure to join.

237. There were documented cases of recruitment of minors, by way of religious indoctrination classes containing elements of need to defend one's area from government, as well as religious teaching. These means of indoctrination was also seen towards adults in opposition-controlled areas, for example in connection with Friday prayers. There were examples of minors under 15 being used in combat or support roles in opposition groups like Ahrar Al-Sham, however primarily above the age of 15. In the reported examples, minors had undertaken both non-combat, i.e. support tasks, and combat activities.

### **Prevalence of civilians not involved in the armed conflict**

238. The extent to which civilians were able to remain uninvolved in armed activities in areas under opposition control was dependent on local circumstances. There were still men capable of carrying arms that had not participated in the armed conflict. For example, the FSA had established an FSA police for the purpose of providing security in the area and not for fighting on front lines. There were individuals with special qualifications who performed other vital jobs in the community, e.g. doctors, and also civilians who would take on other tasks for a group such as coordination with other groups or activists. The source considered that civilians in areas under opposition control went about their lives as best they could. Even if individuals were aligned with groups in control, through e.g. work in the local councils, they did not necessarily take up arms and participate actively in the armed conflict.

### **Treatment of government employees by opposition groups**

239. Lama Fakih, HRW, considered that certain professions came under more suspicion than others in areas under the control of opposition groups. For example, rebels and opposition groups were suspicious of those who had worked for the security services. However, having worked as a government employee did not by default bring a person under suspicion, for example if a person had worked as a teacher or as an engineer for the government. In some areas, government employees were still receiving salaries, but in reality, not working anymore, and they were not looked upon with suspicion because of that to the source's knowledge.

### **Documents issued by opposition groups**

240. Opposition groups had issued different documents such as land deeds, birth certificates, death certificates and contracts of marriage, however the source did not consider that there was any consistent practice in this regard. There were examples of hospitals in some areas having issued documents of birth and death.

### **Documents needed for movement in government-controlled areas**

241. In order to move throughout government-controlled areas, a person needed to be in possession of his or her Syrian ID and if male, his military booklet as well.

### **Exiting Syria**

#### **Exit via the Airport**

242. For leaving the country via the airport, a person needed to be in possession of his passport and if male his military booklet. Palestinians additionally were required to have an exit clearance from the authorities before being allowed exit.

243. The source had limited knowledge about practices at the airport but believed it would be difficult to bribe one's way through the airport with money alone if an individual had outstanding issues with the authorities or did not have required documents. The source considered that one would also need to have very good connections. The source added that most Syrians who had left Syria, had not made use of the airport but had instead used the land borders.

#### **Illegal exit from Syria**

244. Individuals who had left Syria illegally would likely be detained upon return. Many were smuggled back over the borders to avoid being confronted by the authorities, and there were reports of disappearances of people who had been taken by the authorities at checkpoints after having returned. The source considered that the authorities were suspicious of those who had exited illegally, including those who were not necessarily of

any high profile. She explained this by saying that the authorities may suspect those who left illegally had something to hide from them, such as involvement in smuggling of goods or with opposition groups or evasion of military service.

## Skype meeting with Faysal Itani, Atlantic Council

14 March 2017

**About the source:** *Faysal Itani is resident Senior Fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Atlantic Council, focusing primarily on the Syrian conflict and its regional impact.*

### Situation in opposition-controlled areas

#### Recruitment to opposition groups

245. Faysal Itani, Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, said that recruitment by opposition groups varied significantly from area to area depending on groups and local dynamics. There had not been many reports of forced recruitment practices by opposition groups, and joining these groups appears to place mostly on a voluntary basis. The source added, however that this was not necessarily indicative of people joining merely because of ideological conviction. Although many in areas under opposition control were sympathetic to the insurrection against the regime, the incentive to join an opposition group was just as likely to be the need for protection as well as money.
246. The source underlined that local dynamics were of significance with regard to recruitment patterns, i.e. who joined the armed groups' ranks and why. In some areas, people joined for the purpose of defending own villages and areas, while in other areas people saw their effort as connected to a broader insurrection. Many fighters had also shifted convictions in the course of the conflict due to trends of radicalization and corruption within armed groups.
247. Faysal Itani said that there were constantly report of minors, that is persons at the age of 16, being recruited by opposition groups, however, minors in most cases played a supportive role, for instance carrying ammunitions. The source assumed that in the context of the Syrian conflict, a young person aged 16 would not be perceived as a minor. Generally, opposition groups did not seem to be suffering from lack of manpower in a way that they would need to resort to recruiting children or minors against their will. Resources rather than manpower seemed to be more of a pressing issue for commanders of groups. The source assumed that minors mostly joined opposition groups as a result of losing family members in the conflict or because of economic pressure. Joining a group presented one of the only sources of income in areas under opposition control.

248. Regarding whether minors or others in general were pressured to join opposition groups, the source considered that many joined due to personal conviction. Socially, there were pressures to support the cause, however, the source had not heard of examples of individuals being bullied or harassed into joining, although one could not completely exclude the possibility that such things could happen.

### **Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support opposition groups**

249. Civilians were at times involved in providing support to opposition groups in some areas, for example assisting in providing shelter, food and logistical support. Whether or not such activities were provided voluntarily depended on the local dynamics, i.e. the relationship with the local militias. Particularly, if fighters originated from areas that they were serving in, they were generally more popular and seen to be protecting the population.

250. Consequences for not assisting groups who demanded assistance from local civilians depended on the particular group and local dynamics and it was generally hard to define the scale of the problem. According to the source, in many areas, groups in control were to a great extent regarded as legitimate, and popular among local population. At the same time, the source pointed out that Jabhat Al-Nusra had built a legal structure to punish those who did not assist them, including physical punishment, and Jaysh Al-Islam (in Ghouta and Douma, suburbs to Damascus) had been extremely coercive towards individuals to assist the group, and refusing entailed severe punishment even though the group was local to the area.

### **Prevalence of men not being involved in the armed conflict**

251. The majority of civilians were not active in the conflict, including men of fighting age, according to the source. There were areas where the proportion of men who did participate actively in the armed conflict was higher, for example areas where many civilians had been displaced from, i.e. East Aleppo prior to the regime regaining control of the area. The source considered that many had not involved themselves because of fear or disillusionment with the insurgents, while quite a few plainly did not believe that winning the fight was feasible.

252. However, the source considered that local dynamics played an important role in determining whether civilians were pressured to involve themselves in fighting in some instances. In an area like Ghouta people lived under a high degree of repression which could make it difficult for men to avoid involving themselves in the conflict somehow.

### **Treatment of government employees in opposition-controlled areas**

253. Faysal Itani said that to his knowledge, employees of the government were not by default seen as regime agents by opposition groups and many groups were in some way or other

engaged in illegal trading with the government. While government employees who had been part of the intelligence or privileged military apparatus or high-ranking active Baath members had left areas that came under opposition control a long time ago, he did know of former police officers staying in areas that came under the control of opposition groups. Doctors who had been employed in government hospitals were valuable to armed groups and were expected to continue their profession in opposition areas, according to the source. The source also knew of teachers who continued their jobs in opposition-controlled areas.

## **Situation in government-controlled areas**

### **Military service**

254. On the subject of intensified efforts to recruit to the military, Faysal Itani said that the regime in November of 2016 announced the establishment of a Fifth Corps of armed forces. The regime attempted to entice public employees to join the new corps by offering the possibility to retain their salaries from their public sector jobs while receiving their salary from the Fifth Corps.
255. Aside from the establishment of the Fifth Corps, the regime continued its previous mobilization efforts by conducting raids at cafés and in buses. This did not take place in all areas under the government's control, as some areas which were controlled by local pro-regime militias were left alone.
256. In the beginning of the conflict, many conscripts were not sent to the frontlines as they were not trusted. However, as the need for fighters increased, deployment of conscripts to the frontline became less selective. The source mentioned that deserters were forced back into service, while insurgents that had surrendered tended to be offered the choice between displacement or joining the military – or no choice at all. According to the source, one could still find conscripts who were not sent to the frontline, for instance those serving in the police. The source underlined that the Syrian Army was selective with regards to where its units were sent to fight, and generally, combat in sensitive areas, for example in the fight for Aleppo, involved the most loyal units from the army, aside from foreign support.

### ***Corruption in the Syrian Arab Army***

257. Faysal Itani considered that a well-connected conscript or one with a lot of money would be able to avoid being sent to the frontline, however, the source considered that in a poor and disenfranchised country like Syria, most people simply did not have the connections or money to afford to do this.



## Meeting with a diplomatic source (A)

Beirut, 27 March 2017

### Situation in government-controlled areas

#### Military service

258. According to the diplomatic source (A), there had still not been a general mobilization in Syria. That being said the Syrian government still encouraged people to sign up for military service e.g. through posters encouraging citizens to serve the country in the armed forces. Leniencies have been cut back, e.g. university students, whose military service is postponed during their studies, are now called up immediately after their final exam rather than at the end of the academic year as it was the case prior to the conflict. The only male child of either a father or a mother is still exempted from the service, according to the source. Although there are reports that some cases were exempted from military service by paying money, there is no clear procedure to this and there are reports that conscripts had to "buy themselves out" several times before being able to finally leave Syria. According to UNHCR, conscription is one of the most important migration push factors for Syrians.
259. The source had heard of some recruitment raids in public places such as cafes or the streets within the last twelve months although checks of military status at checkpoints remained the main points of control. The source considered that the authorities had the capacity to search for draft evaders or deserters in their homes, however they had no specific research or evidence on the matter. The source added that it was likely that the level of searches could depend on the interest of local security branches in particular individuals.
260. The source pointed to the fact that since 2011, the rounds of drafting had accumulated and therefore the list of persons called up for service had become very long. Drafting is normally conveyed by letter at the age of 18, but there are increasing examples of people being picked up at checkpoints unaware of any notification as they were never received. It is not at every checkpoint that people are checked for military service, hence an individual could never know when and at which checkpoint he would be checked for this. The unpredictability of the recruitment processes has meant that many men that are uncertain about their military service status have become reluctant and fearful about approaching any checkpoints and some interlocutors make reference to a decrease in the number of military age men in the streets.
261. The source did not have information regarding the extent to which reservists were called up for service. However, the source considered that with the extension of the age group

of men being conscripted for service to 50 years, men who had already completed their military service years back, risked being conscripted again. Examples of re-drafting had already been observed. The source assumed that individuals with certain qualifications, such as mechanics, were likely to be at higher risk of being conscripted to service.

262. Asked about prevalence of social pressure to join the army, the source replied that in certain parts of society for example in certain areas that had experienced heavy losses like the regime heartland, it was likely to find considerable social pressure to enrol.

263. According to the source, the military service in Syria was open-ended, and conscripts who had been drafted even before the conflict began in 2011, had not been discharged from service yet. Recruits are supposed to serve in the army as long as there is a "need for fighters".

#### *Prevalence of recruitment of minors*

264. Concerning prevalence of minors in the Syrian army, the sources advised that they were not aware of any persons under 18 years of age being conscripted to the army. The sources added that paperwork regarding conscription was often issued before a person turned 18, and that there were several examples of males approaching the age of 18 that left the country before being called to serve. The source considered that enlisting minors would be politically harmful for the regime and therefore not practiced (higher reputational risk than military need).

#### *Prevalence of corruption in the Syrian Army*

265. Asked about prevalence of corruption, the source stated that corruption in the army was widespread, including to avoid service or to get posted in 'safe' areas by paying bribes to the officers in charge. Such arrangements, which were also known before the conflict, were dependent on personal connections as well as financial resources. It was added that persons living abroad could officially be exempted from the military service by paying 10,000 USD – an official practice also in place prior to the conflict and hence not necessarily related to corruption.

#### *Draft evaders and deserters*

266. Regarding possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion in the event of being caught at a checkpoint, the diplomatic source (A) said that evaders would immediately be drafted to military service upon identification, as mentioned above some were not even aware of having been called up and hence not necessarily aware that they were evading. Anecdotal evidence of execution of alleged deserters at frontlines exists, but the sources were not aware of any confirmed cases.

267. The source found it extremely difficult for draft evaders and deserters to live in government-controlled areas for a long time as it would require very restricted movement that is inability to go out or to move through the many checkpoints.

268. Regarding possible consequences of draft evasion or desertion for family members, the source mentioned that since the beginning of the conflict, there were cases of individuals of a political profile where the authorities had detained family members in order to exchange him or her with the person in question, but the sources had not heard of similar cases relating to draft evaders or deserters.

### **The NDF**

269. The diplomatic source (A) advised that the NDF was in the process of being dismantled as the regime intended to integrate the different militia groups that had until then been operating under the umbrella of the NDF, into the Syrian army and thereby bring them under its direct control. Russia was apparently involved in the restructuring and organization of the militias into a new structure, the Fifth Corps, which would serve this purpose. The Iranians on the other hand had an interest in keeping the NDF militia structure intact. According to the source, some NDF members had previously been able to replace their military service with enlistment in an NDF militia. However, there were now reports of members of NDF militias being conscripted to military service.

270. By establishing the Fifth Corps, the government intended to gather up to 50,000 men including militiamen as well as army personnel. The source added that in areas that were retaken by government forces, men that had not wished to be evacuated to Idlib were also sometimes recruited into the new corps. Joining the ranks of the army was a means of 'reintegrating' people from opposition-held areas according to the government. However, overall there was a lack of clarity regarding the Corps and how far it had come. Additionally, a substantial military effect in the battlefield remained to be seen, according to the source.

### **Public servants' involvement in the conflict**

271. According to the diplomatic source (A) public servants were recruited to the army through the normal conscription procedures.

272. As a public servant, avoiding service was more complicated. At the beginning of the conflict (2011) many public servants were called upon to assist in the crack-down of protests, which was also a means to test the loyalty of the government employees.

273. Concerning travel restrictions on public employees, the source said that public employees needed an authorization to leave the country from their place of work. The higher the

level of sensitivity of the employment, the higher was the level of approval needed. There were some employees, such as military researchers and employees in the Ministry of Defence, who were never allowed to leave the country.

274. The diplomatic source (A) noted that in 2015, the Syrian regime deliberately allowed anyone to leave the country in order to put pressure on Western countries through the refugee stream to Europe. Among those who left were also many public employees.

275. The source emphasized that presently, it was not easy to leave Syria illegally as it was dangerous to go to Turkey through opposition-controlled areas due to the conflict and due to the high level of suspicion towards individuals crossing in to opposition-controlled areas from government-controlled areas as well as a dangerous border-crossing. The borders to Jordan are almost entirely closed and those to Lebanon offer only very limited access.

## **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

### **Recruitment to opposition groups**

276. The diplomatic source (A) underlined that there were many different opposition groups and a multitude of different factors affecting the situation in areas controlled by the different opposition groups. This made it very difficult to generalize about opposition groups and their modes of conduct in areas under their control.

277. Regarding ways of recruitment of fighters to the armed opposition groups, the diplomatic source (A) indicated that they had very limited concrete information. They had not seen evidence of forced recruitment. They were not aware of any particular recruitment units or established recruitment procedures for enlistment.

278. The source noted that there had been reports of minors in opposition groups however they had no evidence of such enlistments as being forced.

279. Asked about prevalence of societal pressure to join the opposition groups, the source mentioned that similar to the situation in government held areas, societal pressure to join armed groups existed, especially in areas with high casualties and hence fewer potential fighters.

### **Treatment of public servants by the opposition groups**

280. Concerning treatment of public servants by the opposition groups, the source said that there had been cases of ill-treatment, threats and assassinations of government employees, but there are also many examples of Government employees who stayed in

areas controlled by opposition groups and continued working, either with the central authority or with the new local administrations.

### **Documents issued by the opposition groups**

281. Several groups had issued ID documents, birth certificates, marriage certificates and other types of documents. These documents were at times issued by government employees who had worked in the government administrative offices when the area had come under opposition control. The source further highlighted that the Syrian government had changed the design of identity cards early in the conflict – as they were only accessible for those able and willing to travel to government-held areas the type of ID held could become an indicator of loyalty.

### **Exit from Syria**

#### **Possible consequences of illegal exit**

282. Persons who had left Syria illegally were able to obtain passports at Syrian embassies abroad. The source knew of cases where persons affiliated to the opposition groups had obtained passports in this way. However, the source considered that whether an individual would be able to return to the country was another question, and added that high-profiled Syrians risked being arrested upon return.

283. Concerning possible consequences of illegal exit from Syria of a low-profiled person in the event of returning or being sent to Syria, the source advised that it was difficult to say what the consequences would be as it depended on many factors.

284. The source added that sometimes a person could be in danger without even knowing it as false accusations could be put forward by any person that might have e.g. a personal grudge or an economic interest. This appears to have been a practice even before the conflict.

### **Meeting with a diplomatic source (B) in Beirut regularly traveling to Syria**

Beirut, 27 March 2017

#### **Situation in government-controlled areas**

##### **Military service**

285. The source said that the authorities continued to conscript to the Syrian Army and those conscripted served open-endedly with no date of discharge in sight. Socioeconomically advantaged families were to a greater extent attempting to send their children out of the country as bypassing military service had become increasingly difficult in the current state

of affairs in Syria. The source considered that the mobilization of conscripts continued as hitherto, however avenues for avoiding service, e.g. possibilities to defer service for various reasons like for study purposes, were now more limited.

286. Regarding prevalence of recruitment in public places, that source said that he had not heard of men being rounded up in public spaces for the purpose of military conscription. However, many were afraid of going out for fear of being confronted by the authorities and sent to the military.

287. The government had also started recruiting people through local agreements in areas recently taken over by the government forces. Men were put before a choice of either enrolling in the army or in an NDF or leave the areas to go to Idlib. Authorities themselves referred to this process as a way for those in areas formerly under opposition control to wipe their slate clean. The source considered that those who stayed in the area and who did not join the government forces would risk being killed.

288. The source added on the subject of recruitment to the army that there had been an increase in men volunteering to enrol in the army and/or in the NDF as a result of the military success that the regime had experienced since the intervention of the Russians (Autumn of 2015).

#### *Recruitment of minors or individuals over the age of 42*

289. According to the source's information, the authorities recruited men between the ages of 18-42.

#### *Prevalence of military conscripts in the Syrian Army avoiding involvement in armed conflict*

290. With regard to involvement of conscripts in combat activities, the source said that there were examples of conscripts in the army who did not participate in combat activities. Many conscripts were tasked with administrative and logistical support and others sent to patrol the border with Lebanon. Some may have been able to influence their service duty and place by being well-connected. Others avoided conscription by enrolling in a local NDF.

#### *Prevalence of corruption in the Syrian Army*

291. Corruption was found on many levels in Syrian society and had reached new heights in the course of the current conflict, according to the source. There were many examples of people using bribes and connections to facilitate dealings with the authorities. According to his information, avoiding military service was possible by paying a bribe of 20,000 USD while being transferred to an administrative unit would cost 10,000 USD in bribe.

### ***Draft evaders and deserters***

292. The government did not search for draft evaders in their homes as it did before the conflict, however, controlling military status at checkpoints had intensified. The consequence for evaders was immediate military conscription, while deserters risked more severe consequences, according to the source.

293. According to the source, due to the intensive control at checkpoints, men who did not want to serve in the army either had to stay at home or leave the country.

### **The NDF**

294. Regarding recruitment to the NDF, the source considered that members joined the militias voluntarily. As NDF militias were often operating in sensitive areas, loyalty to the militia and to those serving in it was considered of key importance, according to the source. The source said that many enrol in the NDF due to the prospect of serving in a local militia with a better salary than the army could provide.

### **Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support pro-regime forces**

295. The source had not heard that civilians in Damascus were pressured to provide support (shelter, food etc.) to the pro-regime forces.

### **Government employees**

296. The source had not heard of government employees being forced or pressured to join the army or the NDF and did not find it probable that force was used in this connection. The source explained that many civilians living in the government-controlled areas were against President Assad and his regime, but for the Syrian state. They supported existing institutions to which they could not see any viable alternatives. Even in Kurdish-controlled areas, for example in Al-Hassakeh, provision of education and health services by the Kurdish administrations was lacking, and people therefore sought out the better alternatives in government-controlled areas. The government was generally interested in maintaining a functioning state administration and a loyalty to the state from its citizens. Coercing public employees to involve themselves in the conflict was therefore not a priority and could be detrimental in this respect.

### **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

#### **Recruitment by opposition groups**

297. The source did not have information about whether recruitment took place by force. Overall, the prospect of an income was a significant incentive for many to join armed groups. However, in some areas where sympathies to the Muslim Brotherhood for example were historically strong, groups which incorporated their ideology in their recruitment strategies had a strong base.

### **Prevalence of men not involved in the armed conflict in opposition-controlled areas**

298. According to the source, there were a large number of men capable of carrying arms, who had been living in opposition-controlled areas for several years and who had not participated in the armed conflict. The mere number of men living in opposition-held Idlib, numbering up to several hundred thousand IDPs alone, indicated that not all men in opposition-controlled areas were involved in armed conflict.

### **Documents issued by opposition groups**

299. There had been a number of attempts by opposition groups to establish administrative structures parallel to the Syrian state, including issuing documents, however they had all failed.

### **Documents needed for movement in government-controlled areas**

300. The source mentioned Syrian ID and military booklet (for men) as two indispensable documents for moving around in areas controlled by the government. Documents were sometimes scanned at checkpoints.

### **Exit from Syria through Damascus International Airport**

301. The source said that Damascus International Airport was a well-functioning airport with a high level of security. Authorities present at the airport included intelligence services which were not generally visible. There were many international departures from the airport. There were also internal flights between Qamishli and Damascus where internal displaced persons had the possibility to fly to Damascus for free.



## Meeting with a diplomatic source (C)

Beirut, 4 April 2017

### Situation in government-controlled areas

#### Military service

302. The diplomatic source said that its information regarding military service was largely based on second-hand information of anecdotal nature, making it difficult to get a clear picture of the extent to which the government had intensified efforts to conscript men. The source went on to explain that through the reconciliation agreements that had recently been entered in areas retaken by the government forces, there seemed to be elements indicating that men in those areas were forced to join the army. Many men in these areas were either evaders of military service or individuals who had postponed their service, for example due to study purposes and had therefore not fulfilled their military service.
303. The nature of the reconciliation agreements differed according to local circumstances and the source considered that conditions of agreements could be harsher in some areas compared to others. In Al-Waer in Homs (March 2017), men seemed to have been met with the option of either leaving for Idlib or of joining the government forces, i.e. the army or the NDF. In Wadi Barada, fighters had been driven to Idlib while others were obliged to serve in the army. Generally, fighters were for the most part sent to Idlib, while other able-bodied men were eligible for conscription. However, the source stressed that he did not have details regarding the different arrangements and how they were implemented.
304. The source added that there were areas under the government's control such as Jebel Druze in Suweida where the regime had tolerated that inhabitants were not drafted for conscription, as long as they did not move out of the area. This understanding between the governorate of Suweida and the government had been in place for some years. The source said that in the current situation, as the government had come out in a strengthened position, these types of arrangements were in some areas renegotiated under serious pressure, and inhabitants were not necessarily safe from conscription any longer.

#### Fifth Corps

305. Regarding the Fifth Corps, the source said that the authorities actively encouraged citizens to enlist for example by sending text messages to mobile phones and putting up large adverts regarding the Fifth Corps in public spaces in Damascus. The source considered that for many from different segments of Syrian society, enrolling in the Fifth Corps was a viable option for earning an income, despite the high risk of being sent to the frontline.

The intention of the Fifth Corps was allegedly to create a reliable and elite component of the army and those enrolled received a higher salary than those serving in the regular army and they were also better trained, including with assistance from Russian and Iranian advisors.

306. The source considered that enrolment in the Fifth Corps was voluntary given the intention of creating a reliable elite force.

307. Asked whether the Fifth Corps was intended to replace the NDF, the source replied that there were generally lots of rumours about the Fifth Corps, and it was difficult to say something with certainty about this.

308. Regarding how the Fifth Corps was involved on the ground, the source said that there was not much confirmed information regarding how and to what extent the Corps had been engaged in the conflict as of yet. Open source information provided some reports, which however had been difficult to corroborate.

### **Government employees**

309. Regarding whether government employees were conscripted for military service, the source found it improbable that the Syrian regime at this stage of the conflict when it was regaining control over many areas, would use force or pressure to make government employees to join the army. The source further said that the Syrian government wanted the government institutions to be intact and functioning and was therefore careful about whom they conscripted from the public sector. The government prided itself with maintaining state services and one reason behind the relative resilience of the government to recruit among public employees was this continuation of a functioning public sector. However, the source assumed that if the situation in the battlefield changed and the government became desperate, it could change its attitude and force its employees to join the pro-regime forces.

### **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

#### **Recruitment to opposition-controlled areas**

310. Regarding the prevalence of forced recruitment in opposition-controlled areas, the source said that in open sources, one could find examples of forced recruitment, including recruitment of minors, however it was often difficult to confirm these reports. In general, coverage of the conflict was characterized by a huge amount of propaganda, making it hard to navigate the information and documentation made available through open sources. There were also a number of stories of forced recruitment by groups like Jabhat

Al-Nusra, however these reports were hard to confirm not in the least due to the amounts of propaganda circulating from the groups themselves and those opposing them.

311. Concerning whether there was social pressure on men to join armed groups, the source considered that pressure did exist and in some areas more so than others, for example in Ghouta. Many groups also idealized the purpose of joining the groups, i.e. the possibility to fight for a noble cause.

312. The source considered that at this stage of the conflict many people who lived in the opposition-controlled areas did not have many options and joining an armed group was perhaps a way to make a living.

## **Exiting Syria**

313. The source had not heard of cases of people being able to bribe their way through the international airport in Damascus, but there were anecdotes about that such possibility existed through the land borders.

## **Meeting with a diplomatic Source (D)**

Beirut, 31 March 2017

## **Situation in government-controlled areas**

### **Military service**

314. According to the diplomatic source, the most important recent development with regard to recruitment to the army was the local agreements entered by the regime and oppositions groups in areas retaken by the government forces. The negotiations usually contained an element of conscription of men of military service age in the given area.

315. Generally, men eligible for conscription in these areas were given six months before having to report for conscription. How men were conscripted and where to varied from place to place depending on local circumstances. In some instances, such as in Moadamiya, conscripts were allowed to stay in their local area while serving in the army, whereas in others, men had been sent to other areas.

316. The source explained that in the agreements the obligation to serve was often linked to the ability to move around. Men of military service age from the 'reconciled' areas, who had not sorted out their status with the authorities, that is who were not conscripted, were not able to pass checkpoints or move around freely. The source added that she had

heard reports of men having been smuggled out of these areas in order to avoid conscription.

317. The source explained that in 2015 there were reports of campaigns and raids taking place in public places for the purpose of recruitment, however, there were no reports on this taking place recently and the source considered that the main avenue for pursuing evaders and deserters was through checkpoints where military status was checked rigorously.

318. The source assessed that it was tremendously difficult for evaders and deserters to live in government-controlled areas for a long time as it was difficult to avoid checkpoints when moving around.

### ***Consequences of evasion and desertion***

319. If caught, deserters risked ill-treatment ranging from detention, executions or disappearances. The source considered that the consequences varied and depended on which checkpoint and in what area, one got caught.

### **Prevalence of pressuring civilians to provide support to pro-regime forces**

320. Regarding the prevalence of the army coercing civilians to assist with food, shelter, first aid or information, the source said that she had not heard stories of that having occurred. The source however, considered it likely that civilians were pressured or forced to provide information to the authorities as this had also been the situation before the outbreak of the war. The diplomatic source considered that those who refused to provide information when requested to do so, risked being tried in a terrorism court or detained.

### **Public servants**

321. Government employees were required to have an authorization in order to leave the country. There had been instances of individuals who were denied such authorization.

### **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

#### **Recruitment by opposition groups**

322. Recruitment by opposition groups was influenced by various factors including local dynamics. For example, in eastern Ghouta, it was difficult to assess to which extent the locals were willingly taking up arms to protect the city or if they were being forced in to it. The source considered that economic incentives as well as the urge to protect one's home or city served as a driver for recruitment. According to the source, some armed groups paid 500 USD per month to their fighters which was almost ten times higher than a teacher's salary.

### Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support opposition groups

323. Regarding the prevalence of pressuring civilians to support opposition groups, the source referred to the conflict in eastern Aleppo in the end of 2016, where there were reports of civilians not being allowed to leave the city, including doctors who were needed to take care of the wounded. The source emphasized however, that whether or not civilians were pressured to support opposition groups depended on the situation and the area, but was likely.

### Treatment of public servants by opposition groups

324. Concerning treatment of public servants by opposition groups, the source said that it depended on the groups in question as well as on which profession the public servant had held. Despite the ongoing civil war, public servants such as teachers were still needed and therefore not necessarily ill-treated in areas outside of the government's control. However, jihadist groups such as *Jabhat Al-Nusra* demanded that teachers instructed in Islamic teachings, while it seemed that moderate opposition groups supported the continuation of teaching in areas under their control.

### Issuance of documents by opposition groups

325. The source had heard that the same civil servants that used to issue government documents before the conflict continued the issuance of documents but on a different letterhead. The government did not accept these documents even though many of them were issued in accordance with the same rules and regulations as before.

326. However, the source emphasized that the lack of personal documents, for example regarding birth, death, marriage, etc. was a very big issue for those who resided in areas outside of government control and many children born after the outbreak of the war were for example at risk of statelessness.

### Exiting Syria

327. With regards to prevalence of corruption in the airport, the diplomatic source considered that leaving Syria from the airport was difficult for those having an issue with the authorities, for instance an evader. This was, according to the source, the reason why many would rather exit via land borders. Making use of bribes to leave Syria via the airport was considered possible if the bribe was substantial.

328. Regarding consequences upon return for having exited Syria illegally, the source found that the situation was difficult to assess as the Syrian government on the one hand had stated that everyone who had left Syria was a traitor while on the other hand had encouraged every Syrian to return.

## **Documents needed for movement in government-controlled areas**

329. Both men and women should be in possession of ID card in order to move around in areas controlled by the government. Men were also required to be in possession of military booklets.

## **Skype-meeting with a diplomatic source based in Turkey**

15 March 2017

### **Situation in opposition-controlled areas**

330. The diplomatic source in Turkey advised that since the beginning of the conflict, the armed opposition groups generally had recruited fighters on a voluntary basis.

331. Asked about prevalence of recruitment of minors to the opposition groups, the source said that opposition groups generally did not recruit child soldiers, that is minors under 15 years old. The youngest amongst the recruited (i.e. minors between 15-17 years old) are usually given other tasks than taking up arms and fighting, but as the conflict progressed there were probably an increasing number of exceptions in the later years. In some besieged areas, minors were involved in smuggling goods, e.g. basic provisions, in and out of the area for the armed groups.

332. According to the source, very few women had taken up arms and took part in fighting on the opposition's side.

333. Concerning prevalence of social pressure on people to join the opposition groups, the diplomatic source said that in some areas, there was social pressure on young men to support the opposition groups either through fighting in the battlefield or providing support in other ways. The diplomatic source had generally not heard of cases where civilians were forced to support the opposition groups or about possible consequences of rejecting to provide support to the rebel groups. It was added that in most areas controlled by the opposition groups, there was a spirit of moral obligation and necessity to provide support to these groups.

334. On the other hand, constraints – even very serious – have been reported in some areas controlled by jihadist groups like Al-Nusra, where civilians have been at times prevented from leaving and strict Islamic law has been enforced.

### **Treatment of public servants by the opposition groups**

335. With regard to the treatment of public servants by the opposition groups, the diplomatic source considered that there were three groups of public employees:

1. Those who had defected to the opposition and continued their professions in service for the opposition groups, for example doctors, teachers, policemen. They were welcomed by these groups.
2. Those who worked for the government in an area which later was taken by the opposition, but who stopped working for the government since then and promised not to work for the government any more. They were not treated differently than others, and no harm was inflicted on them.
3. Those who were believed to be spies and informants for the government, or individuals with blood on their hands, e.g. the employees from the security services, with reports of persons detained and/or facing ill-treatment, depending on the armed group/area.

336. The source underlined that public employees were not by default at risk from opposition groups by virtue of their previous positions and there were rebel-held areas where public employees such as teachers and doctors continued their jobs while receiving their salaries from the government.

337. However, the source added that mistrust and paranoia was extensive in opposition-held areas.

### **Documents issued by the opposition groups**

338. According to the source, mainly in the earlier years of the conflict there had been examples of opposition groups confiscating blank passports in areas where they gained control, and subsequently issuing passports to people who needed them.

339. The source said that Syrians faced a huge challenge with regard to registration of marriage, death, births and land in areas outside of government control.

340. Regarding whether opposition groups issued documents needed for movement in areas they controlled, the diplomatic source advised that some groups required that a person moving from one area rebel-held to another, showed a letter or document from the group controlling the area one came from. However, the source underlined that s/he had not heard of formal requirements, and practices differed from group/area to group/area.

### **Situation in government-controlled areas**

#### **Military service**

341. The source said that since 2015, the government had encouraged people to protect their own local areas, for example through joining local militias organized under the NDF. These units however, often operated outside of or with limited control of the Syrian authorities.

342. Men of military service age continued to fear moving around in government-controlled areas due to the risk of being caught at checkpoints and being drafted to the army. Previously, if a draft evader was caught at a checkpoint, he was given a deadline within which he should report to the army's recruitment offices. This was no longer the case and evaders were drafted on the spot. The source had heard of cases where men were taken at checkpoints and their families had never heard from them again.

## Meeting with Dr. Hilal Khashan, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, American University of Beirut

Beirut, 4 April 2017

*About the source: The source is Professor of Political Science and Department Chair at the American University of Beirut. Research interests focus on Middle Eastern regional security as well as Shiite Islamic revival and the militarization of Lebanese Shiites. The source has authored five books and 65 articles, which have been published in different esteemed journals, and he has reviewed manuscripts for journals such as Security Dialogue, The Arab World geographer, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Social Behavior and Personality, International Migration Journal, Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, and International Studies perspectives. The source has appeared in international news outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, Reuters, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune, Al-Jazeera, and Al-Hurra.*

## Situation in government-controlled areas

### Military service

343. Dr. Hilal Khashan, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at AUB said that within the last few months there had been more concerted recruitment efforts especially in areas retaken by the government forces. The pool of recruits had diminished over the last years. Many evaders that had lived in those areas outside of the government's reach were now subject to military conscription.

344. In reconciliation agreements which had been entered into in areas retaken by the government, no information regarding recruitment was necessarily included. Typically, prior to an agreement, the government forces kept an area under siege, blocking the entry of goods or medicine, until the groups in control gave in. Subsequently, an agreement



would be entered into by the local parties and the government for example giving the locals permission to maintain local security as a designated government force, e.g. through an NDF structure, and passage of goods into the area would again be allowed.

345. With regard to recruitment of reservists, the source said that the reserve was historically established for the purpose of ensuring capacity to stand against any confrontation with Israel. However, as the conflict had decimated the skeleton of the Syrian Army and the government no longer had the capacity to maintain the reserve service, the organization of the reserve did not exist as it did before. In general, the pool of recruits to the army had diminished and the government had started to recruit everyone even men up to the age of 50 and also only male children of families who previously had been exempted from service.

### **The Fifth Corps**

346. Regarding the Fifth Corps, Dr. Hilal Khashan said that the corps was established with the intention of building a capable fighting component organized under the Syrian Army while dismantling the NDF which had grown notorious: the NDF was reputed to constitute armed groups fighting over the spoils of war, terrorizing local populations and imposing protection money in areas where they held control.

347. People were enlisting on a voluntary basis and how recruitment was carried out was determined regionally by the local provinces. The source considered that local leaders in some areas might encourage enlistment. However, economic incentives generally played a significant role for those who enlisted, as salaries were normally twice as high as that in the Syrian Army. Engagement in the Corps was also part-time for some, according to the source.

348. The source said that the Fifth Corps' capacity was still questionable as it was still a force in the making which had not built up particular capabilities or any expertise. The NDF was still functioning as hitherto and any dismantling of the forces would not take place overnight.

349. With regard to the general involvement of conscripts in combat activities, the source said that typically, militias and proxy groups, such as Hezbollah, as well as special troops were the major forces fighting in major operations throughout the conflict.

### **Recruitment of minors**

350. Generally, the Syrian Army wanted to give the impression of operating according to the legal provisions set out when it came to recruitment of minors. Therefore, minors were

not recruited to the Syrian Army, however it could not be excluded that minors had enlisted voluntarily in support functions.

### ***Evaders and deserters***

351. According to the source, searching for evaders and deserters had intensified and was mainly concentrated at checkpoints.

352. Before the start of the war, deserters faced a penalty of five years imprisonment. However, since the war started, deserters were sent back to the army and to the front lines. Evaders, if caught, were sent to military conscription.

### ***Prevalence of conscripts not being sent to the frontline during their military service***

353. According to the source, one can influence the conditions for his service through bribes and connections. Bribery was a well-documented and widespread phenomenon in Syria today, and there were cases of men who could stay away from fighting by paying bribes to officers in the army. In addition, a conscript's background could influence the place of his service. For instance, Alawites who came from the same clan as the president had a better chance to be placed in units such as logistics and communication where the risk of participating in fighting was low.

### ***Government employees***

354. The regime's approach towards government employees was based on a combination of reward and punishment. Government employees were encouraged to engage themselves in pro-government forces, according to the source. However, in some instances, employees had been pressured to support the regime by joining the pro-regime forces: for example in 2014, many government employees were ordered to join the NDF or risk losing their jobs and government benefits that came with it.

355. The source said that he had no information of the government forcing employees to join the new Fifth Corps. He explained that Syria's public sector had employed a considerable percentage of the population and was generally characterized by over-employment, approximated at 500,000 bureaucrats before the start of the war. The source considered that there were a number of employees whose positions were not crucial for administration of services, and therefore the government had a pool of potential loyal candidates to mobilize to pro-government forces. However, the source did not consider that it had been government policy to coerce employees to join the NDF, the military or other pro-regime forces.

### ***Travel restrictions***

356. Generally, government employees had to obtain an authorization from their place of work to be able to leave the country.

357. Regarding consequences of having left the country without authorization, the source said that generally the government did not stand in the way of those who wished to leave the country as that would mean less mouths to feed. However, Syrians who wished to leave did not have many options due to increasing restrictions for entry in neighbouring countries and in Europe.

## Situation in opposition-controlled areas

### Recruitment to opposition groups

358. The driving force for enlistment in opposition groups was primarily hatred to the regime, according to the source. The extent of aversion towards the regime was immense and made up a primary factor for sustaining an armed rebellion. The source did not consider that armed opposition groups were using force and threatening people who were not joining their ranks. Many different factors played a role when it came to reasons behind joining armed groups in opposition-controlled areas, including local dynamics, the role of peers and personal ties to a particular group as well as tribal affiliations.

359. With regard to recruitment of minors, the source said that especially jihadist groups had been inclined to recruit minors. The source explained that generally in high casualty conflicts, young people were particularly susceptible to joining armed groups. Many youngsters were in a vulnerable situation, with many coming from broken families, others having had relatives killed in the conflict and still others being heavily influenced by religious indoctrination through local leaders.

360. The source said that he had not heard of women being recruited to armed groups.

## Meeting with a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organisation

Beirut 30 March 2017

**About the source:** *The source is a senior analyst in an independent non-governmental organisation providing analysis about conflicts throughout the world. The source has worked with the Middle East for many years and covered aspects of the conflict in Syria and its impact on regional dynamics.*

## Situation in government-controlled areas

### Military service

361. A senior analyst from an independent non-governmental organisation advised that the Syrian government was facing a real problem with regard to recruitment of men in military service age to the army since the pool of recruits had diminished. However, the source had not observed an intensification of recruitment to the army during 2016, which according to the source was partly because the regime was more reliant on external military forces (Russian and Iranian). At the same time, among certain groups in Syria, there was still a will to defend the country in the face of what was portrayed as an existential conflict, for example among Alawite communities.
362. The source further stated that Iranians and Russians had two different approaches to how the pro-regime forces should be organised. Whilst Russians were in favour of keeping the army together and to bring the pro-regime militias under the direct control of the government and the army, Iranians and Hezbollah wanted to preserve the militias as they were, that is under the loosely organized umbrella of the National Defence Forces, and to recruit foreign Shiite fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the source had not observed any attempt by the Russians to dismantle the NDF.
363. Regarding prevalence of corruption in the Syrian army, the source said that corruption was extensive in Syria and widespread in the army. As an example, she mentioned that she knew of cases of Syrians living in Lebanon who paid bribes to officers from the Syrian army in order to get information about their military service situation before going back to Syria. During the course of the conflict, corruption on the whole had increased in Syria and also became a way for people to make money.
364. Asked about the source's assessment on the extent to which one still found evaders and deserters living in the government-controlled areas, the source replied that it was extremely difficult for evaders and deserters to move around in the areas under the government's control.

### The NDF

365. The source did not have information concerning ways of recruitment to the NDF. However, she did not find it probable that the NDF would recruit people by force, and she assumed that they would rather use incentives such as high salary and possibility to defend one's own area to attract manpower.
366. With regard to possible recruitment of minors to the NDF, the source mentioned that militias in the region in general including NDF had another definition of 'minors' and she had heard that persons around the age of 16 were considered by the NDF as mature to fight.

## Situation in opposition-controlled areas

### Recruitment to opposition groups

367. The source advised that she had not heard of opposition groups recruiting fighters by force. According to the source, factors motivating recruitment to groups included tribal or family connections, economic incentives, ideological reasons, fear of the regime etc.

368. Concerning prevalence of social pressure to join the rebel groups, the source said that recruitment was based on multitude of factors mentioned above (tribal or family connections, economic incentives, ideological reasons, fear for the regime etc.). The source pointed out that since the opposition groups were interested in giving a picture of themselves as a good alternative to the regime, forcing people to join them would be detrimental to this image and therefore she did not consider forced recruitment quite probable (outside of IS and possibly Al-Nusra).

### Treatment of public servants by the opposition groups

369. The source had not heard of cases of government employees being harmed by the opposition groups merely because of having been employed by the government. On the contrary, she had heard that there were government employees, who were working in the opposition-controlled areas whilst receiving their salaries from the government, for example in Idlib.

## Exit from Syria

370. Regarding possible consequences of illegal exit from Syria in the event a person returned to Syria, the source said that no Syrian, who had left Syria illegally, would return to the country without having connections in Syria that could inform him on how the regime would perceive him upon return.

## Skype meeting with Rami, consultant on Syria and Iraq to Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East Office

Beirut, 13 March 2017

**About the source:** The Heinrich Böll Stiftung works with capacity building for civil society groups, including democracy, women's empowerment and citizen journalism for Syrians based in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. The organization partly works as a think tank doing research and analysis on developments in Syria and the region. (Please refer to: <http://lb.boell.org/>)

## Situation in the government-controlled areas

### Military Service

371. Asked whether there had been an intensification of recruitment to the army within the last 12 months, the source explained that normally, conscripts were called up twice yearly (summer and winter). In addition to these collective recruitments, there were also cases of individual recruitments taking place during the year. Most of the recruited conscripts were sent to Al-Nabik recruitment centre in the county side of Damascus. The reason why conscripts no longer were sent to the small recruitment centres which existed in each city was that since the beginning of the conflict, these small centres were not as functional as they used to be prior to the conflict.

372. Currently military status of all men was controlled at all checkpoints and even those who had an official deferment from service, could risk being taken in by the authorities and be drafted for regular conscription. The source had not heard of concerted efforts to seek out those eligible for conscription through raids in public spaces such as cafés. However, the source said that there were cases of men being recruited to military service at gas stations where two-three soldiers were present with laptops checking up on military status and he therefore considered that this could also take place at other locations.

373. The regime also recruited those of military service age who had already completed their military service as their experience from prior service was of interest to the authorities.

374. The source said that those confronted at checkpoints were taken in by the authorities immediately, rather than being given a date and or place for reporting for service. Regarding the prevalence of recruiting women to serve in the army, the source said that women from the coastal Alawite areas, such as Latakia and Tartous, had volunteered to enlist in the Syrian Army or the NDF. The source had not heard about cases of women being recruited by force.

### *Prevalence of military conscripts in the Syrian Army avoiding involvement in armed conflict*

375. Regarding the possibility of avoiding involvement in combat activities, Rami explained that within the Syrian Arab Army there was a large percentage of conscripts who were undertaking administrative and supporting functions. There were examples of individuals with minor disabilities conscripted and assigned to undertake administrative tasks as part of their military service as well as cases of regular conscripts assigned to such unarmed tasks. However, within the army there were no assurances and an individual assigned an administrative task or assigned to serve in a particular area could not count on that he would never be moved and/or assigned combat duty.

### *Corruption in the Syrian Army*

376. The source considered that because of corruption, conscripts with economic means had been able to pay a bribe in order to influence their service location, for example closer to home with the possibility of going home in the evenings. The possibility to influence one's service through corruption existed before the war as well.

377. The source considered that generally, at this stage of the conflict, the Syrian people were in great economic need, and therefore most civilians would not have the financial resources needed to bribe officials.

### *Reservists*

378. Rami explained that reservists were called up based on either their qualifications, or based on the profiles needed in the Syrian army at a given time. Individuals who had acquired specific qualifications during military service, i.e. tank drivers or sniper, were often in higher demand than individuals with qualifications acquired from studies in their civilian life or individuals who had served in for example the administration during their military service. For instance, if an engineer had served in the administration during his military service was not as much in demand as an engineer who had served in the surface-surface missile brigade. However, the source underlined that even those not being specifically targeted presently could risk being sought after when their specific qualifications were needed. The source added that the army was recently in a severe need of doctors.

### *Recruitment of minors or individuals over the age of 42*

379. Rami said that minors were not conscripted to the Syrian army.

380. Regarding recruitment of men over the age of 42, the source referred to reports of a military decree, extending the military service age from 42 up to 50. The source had heard of men up until the age of 52 being drafted in areas recently retaken by the government forces, for example in Aleppo where many men were immediately recruited to serve in the military. Although the source pointed out that he could not refer to specific cases where men over the age of 42 were recruited in these areas, he underlined at the same time that recruitment took place in an arbitrary way in these areas, and everything could therefore be expected in such situation. Generally, as there was a continued need for manpower, especially for those with experience, the source considered that the authorities would draft those who had exceeded the age of 42. The source noted that the situation in Syria was characterized by a high degree of chaos and arbitrariness, therefore regulations and decrees were not necessarily strictly adhered to.

### *Draft evaders and deserters*

381. Regarding pursuing those who evaded service, the regime still had the capacity to do house searches and continued to do so, albeit in an arbitrary manner as opposed to consistently checking names off a list. The regime had erected numerous check points in

areas under its control, which resulted in evaders at some point being recruited to the army. Living in regime-controlled areas was considered extremely difficult for evaders, which resulted in many evaders travelling to opposition-controlled areas to avoid being found.

382. Consequences for evasion were arrests and immediate recruitment. The source had heard from friends that some evaders were sent to the frontline without proper training.

383. Desertion from the service was by law punishable by death in wartime if the person deserted to the enemy and life time imprisonment if he deserted during the battle with the enemy. In practice, there were cases of deserters being deployed to the frontline as the army needed manpower. In peacetime, persons who were absent from their service more than six days (if they left without permission) or more than 15 days (if they left with permission), would be imprisoned for nine months in Palmyra prison and the imprisonment would be longer if the desertion was repeated. The source pointed out that the military penal code in Syria was a complicated law.<sup>219</sup>

384. Regarding possible consequences of evasion or desertion for family members, the source explained that only family members of deserters or evaders who were actively fighting against the regime, were at risk of serious ill-treatment.

### **National Defence Forces (NDF)**

385. Rami said that enrolment in the NDF was voluntary and was often incentivized by the prospect of getting a better salary.

### ***Recruitment of women and minors to the NDF***

386. There were examples of minors in the NDF bearing arms and fighting on frontlines. The source considered that some minors were lured, pushed or attracted to join the NDF because of financial incentives. Rami emphasized that people were living in extreme poverty and joining militias was often considered the only possibility to survive and provide for family members.

### **Prevalence of pressuring civilians to support pro-regime forces**

387. Regarding the prevalence of pressuring civilians to provide support (shelter, food etc.) to government forces, there were examples of civilians having to give up their houses for strategic purposes for example living close to the presidential palace. The source considered that those who did not comply with such requests were perceived as opposing the government.

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<sup>219</sup> The source referred to this link [http://www.parliament.gov.sy/laws/Law/1950/penal\\_10.htm](http://www.parliament.gov.sy/laws/Law/1950/penal_10.htm)



388. Pressuring civilians to provide information was prevalent. Individuals with family members living in opposition-controlled areas were pressured to provide the regime with information about people living in those areas. That was also the case for individuals working in opposition-controlled areas, who were subject to pressure such as arrest, to provide information about the situation in those areas.

### **Government employees**

389. Coercing government employees to engage in pro-regime demonstrations was the case in the beginning of the conflict but was no longer happening. Government employees were perceived as benefitting from living in areas of relative safety, and were therefore expected to contribute to the continuation of this state.

390. Rami did not consider that government employees were pressured to join pro-government militias, and explained that militias normally depended on family and tribal structures as bases of recruitment. However, for recruitment to the Syrian army, the source considered that civil servants were conscripted like other civilians.

### **Travel restrictions**

391. Public servants were restricted from leaving the country without an official authorization. Authorization was sometimes granted, but certain categories of government employees such as civilian employees with the Ministry of Defence who were in possession of sensitive information, would not be given authorization to leave the country. The source considered that because professionals such as doctors and nurses were in high demand, it might be more difficult for such categories of government employees to be given authorization to leave, compared to teachers for example.

392. A person abandoning his government position without prior notice would not be allowed to work for the government again. The source said that upon return to the country, an individual who had left his government position without prior notice would likely be questioned about the reason for his or her abandonment. It would not automatically result in detention, however, in certain cases, individuals would not be allowed to leave the country again. The source found that the situation was characterized by a high degree of arbitrariness and that no one could be certain that abandonment of government position without notice would not entail detention.

393. The situation was the same for all categories of government employees.

### **Situation in the opposition-controlled areas**

### Recruitment by opposition groups

394. Regarding the prevalence of forced recruitment by opposition groups, Rami said that opposition groups did not recruit fighters by force, however religious militant groups were using the duty of *Jihad* as a means to convince people to join their ranks.

395. Opposition groups were also providing various incentives for joining their ranks, such as providing fighters with the financial means to provide for their families. Socially, there were pressure to join as well as instances of members of opposition groups harassing and accusing males of fighting age of being cowards for not joining. However, the over-arching form of pressure stemmed from an economic necessity and at this stage of the conflict, especially individuals wanted by the regime, were joining opposition groups as it was considered the only option to be able to provide for one's family.

### Recruitment of women and minors

396. The source had not heard of women being forcibly recruited by opposition groups.

397. Generally, recruitment of minors to opposition groups was of limited scope. There had been instances of minors of the age of 16-17 in FSA brigades. The Jihadi groups such as Al-Nusra would gladly accept children to join their ranks yet they did not force them to do so. Although Al-Nusra cared about its reputation, they would not refuse to recruit children. The source had personally not seen many minors fighting with Al-Nusra

### Prevalence of pressuring civilians to support opposition groups with certain tasks

398. Regarding the prevalence of pressuring civilians to provide support (shelter, food, etc.) to armed opposition groups, Rami said that groups like the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA) would not compel such support and were known to use houses that were empty or were left voluntarily by the owners.

### Treatment of public servants by opposition groups

399. Before the war, the public sector employed a significant percentage of the workforce in Syria and having worked as a government employee did therefore not in itself put one under suspicion in opposition-controlled areas. Rami referred to numerous government employees such as teachers and doctors residing in opposition-controlled areas and at the same time collecting salaries from the regime without it causing an issue with opposition groups.

400. Doctors and nurses were generally valuable to opposition groups.

401. Asked whether certain government employees by default were regarded as affiliated with the regime, Rami answered that when opposition groups gained control of an area,

certain categories of government employees were immediately targeted and put on the spot to declare whether they supported the opposition groups or not. That was for instance the case for police officers and active Baath party members. Active Baath party members were often well-known in their home towns and had therefore either fled the area prior to it be taken by the opposition groups or they had decided to stay. Those who stayed were required to demonstrate a stronger commitment and dedication for ‘the cause/revolution’.

402. For some categories of government employees, such as individuals working for the Military or Air Force security services, it was not possible to switch to the opposition, and members of these groups would be killed immediately when an area was taken by an opposition group. According to the source, these two security services were particularly known to recruit Alawites and they had a very bad reputation among opposition groups.

### Issuance of documents by opposition groups

403. Opposition groups had issued various documents such as marriage and birth certificates. However, as documents issued by opposition groups generally were not considered very useful, people were still highly dependent on documents issued by the government. Those afraid of approaching government administrations were not able to officially register marriages and births for example. There was no requirement to carry documentation issued by opposition groups in areas under their control.

### Exiting Syria

404. Regarding the security situation en route Damascus International Airport, Rami said that the road was completely secure. Authorities present at the airport were immigration authorities and the Air Force Intelligence. Before the conflict erupted, the Air Force Intelligence was not visible in the airport at all, but the source did not know how visible they were now.
405. For leaving the airport, a person had to be in possession of his Syrian ID, passport and men of fighting age were also required to present a military booklet. The authorities were rigorously controlling military service status and men who did not bring their military booklet were not allowed to leave the country. For those, whose military service was deferred for different reasons, mainly university students, it was necessary to carry the document called ‘the postponement paper’ showing that their military service was postponed. This document had to be renewed every year for a limited number of years.

406. Corruption was generally widespread in many encounters with the authorities and bribery was considered a possibility when exiting the airport for those able to pay large sums of money. The source said that using bribe was in general highly dependent on the context and the nature of the outstanding issue with the authorities. Bribery was, for instance, not considered a possibility for individuals who were wanted in relation with activities considered by the regime as high-profile crimes, for instance armed opposition or political activities in the areas controlled by the government. The source had seen cases of humanitarian workers being arrested accused of being involved in 'terrorist' activities.

407. The general arbitrariness of the situation in Syria added to the picture meaning that it was difficult to know with certainty when and if it was a possibility to make use of bribery. Generally, the risk of using bribes at the airport was considered very high, since the airport was a sensitive place and the control was therefore strict. Additionally, accepting bribes was a serious crime, and there was always the risk of officials getting offended and angry with the proposition.

### **Possible consequence of illegal exit**

408. The authorities would often deliberately link someone who had left the country illegally with a political charge and depending on the level of suspicion faced, individuals who returned after having left illegally would either be detained and be presented to the Political Security Directorate by the authorities or be released with an instruction to report to the Political Security Directorate themselves. Another consequence would be that the person's documents would automatically be confiscated.

409. Rami added that the situation was highly arbitrary and unreliable and that there had been cases of individuals being denied entry because they originated from an area under opposition control or being pressured to provide the regime with information on activities in their area of origin. There had also been instances of individuals undergoing heightened scrutiny if returning with passports that had been stamped by Turkish authorities bordering areas controlled by opposition groups or suspected of being controlled by opposition groups. These situations led to mandatory screenings by the Political Security Directorate upon return to the country in order to ascertain whether the illegal exit had taken place in an area controlled by an armed opposition group and questioning about the reasons for having left illegally.

## **Meeting with Carnegie Middle East Centre**

Beirut 28 March 2017

### **Situation in government-controlled areas**

## Military service

410. According to Carnegie Middle East, the government continued drafting men between the ages of 18 and 42. When a person turned 18, he would automatically be called up. Persons within that age group who had already completed their military service could also be called up for service again. Individuals who had deferrals for military service, e.g. students, were subject to conscription as the Syrian Army was stretched to the limit. The source suspected that because of this, only male children of families who had previously been exempted from recruitment were also at risk of being drafted for service.
411. The source had not heard of persons under the age of 18 being conscripted to the Syrian army, but one could find minors in local paramilitary groups.
412. Carnegie Middle East had also heard of men up to 50 years old being called up as reservists. There was no indication that specific profiles of reservists were called up, and the source considered that no one was spared.
413. Reservists and conscripts were kept in the army way past the date that service officially was limited to.
414. Asked about whether the regime had intensified its efforts to find and draft individuals through for instance raids in public places within the last 12 months, the source replied that she had not heard of such raids, however searching for draft evaders and deserters had been intensified at checkpoints. The source further said that young men were generally afraid to approach checkpoints.
415. The source could not give an assessment of the extent to which one could still find draft evaders or deserters living in government-controlled areas. However, she emphasized that it was extremely difficult for evaders and deserters to stay in areas held by the regime as Syrian society generally with the ongoing conflict had become increasingly militarized, for example through the establishment of checkpoints everywhere, making it difficult to avoid being caught by the authorities.
416. According to the source, the only way to avoid military service was to flee the country, and there were also a large number of young Syrian men within the military service age who had fled to Lebanon to evade the service. Most deserters had also left the areas under the control of the government.

417. Regarding consequences of evasion of military service, the source considered that evaders would most likely be imprisoned or conscripted to the army if confronted by the authorities.
418. Asked about possible consequences of draft evasion or desertion for the family members, it was the source's assessment that presently, the government did not have the capacity to go after family members of deserters and evaders, but that this was not an indication that there were no risks for family members of evaders or deserters. The source underlined though that this assessment was based on common-sense rather than facts and reports on this issue.
419. Concerning possibility of conducting other tasks (i.e. administrative tasks, guarding etc.) than partaking in armed combat during the military service, the source advised that she had no information on this issue, however, she assumed that if a conscript was well-connected to the regime, he could avoid being sent to the frontlines.
420. Regarding prevalence of corruption in the Syrian army, the source mentioned that there were a lot of anecdotal, unconfirmed stories about this. The source however found that corruption had definitely increased as the war has evolved with many informal networks emerging that had opened up new avenues for corruption.

### **The NDF**

421. According to Carnegie Middle East, recruitment to the NDF took place on a voluntary basis rather than by force. There were a number of incentives such as high salary and social status (possibility to become a "local hero") which made joining to the NDF attractive. For young men living in a conflict zone with no employment or prospects, enrolling in a militia served as a great way to make a living.
422. Asked about prevalence of social pressure to join the NDF, the source replied that there was social pressure in certain areas, for instance among Alawites. The social pressure was particularly motivated by the sectarian tensions which the conflict was built on. As a young man, you were thus expected to defend your community by joining the NDF.
423. Pressuring civilians to provide support to militias, for example with food, shelter, first aid or providing information happened in any conflict, including in the Syrian conflict. There were reports of this taking place on a micro-level, however there were no indications that it took place on a large scale, i.e. in the sense that entire cities were pressured to perform supporting tasks.

424. Regarding militias in general, the source said that due to the conflict and the weakening of the state, the Syrian regime had become dependent on these for day-to-day tasks in areas under its control.

## Annex B: Terms of Reference

### 1. Situation in the Government-controlled areas

#### 1.1. Military service

- 1.1.1. Prevalence of general mobilisation
- 1.1.2. Possibility of military conscripts in the Syrian Arab Army avoiding involvement in armed conflict
- 1.1.3. Profile of reservists called up for service
- 1.1.4. Recruitment of persons under the age of 18 and over the age of 42
- 1.1.5. Authorities' capacity and willingness to pursue deserters and evaders of service 1.1.6. Possible consequences of evasion or desertion for family members

#### 1.2. The National Defence Forces (NDF)

- 1.2.1. Possibility of a member of NDF avoiding involvement in armed conflict
- 1.2.2. Ways of recruiting to NDF, including prevalence of forced recruitment

#### 1.3. Public servants' involvement in the conflict

- 1.3.1. Prevalence of coercing public servants/government officials to engage in pro-regime activities
- 1.3.2. Consequences of refusing to partake in pro-regime activities
- 1.3.3. Travel restrictions on public servants
- 1.3.4. Consequences of abandonment of government position

#### 1.4. Prevalence of pressure on civilians to support government forces

### 2. Situation in the opposition-controlled areas

- 2.1. Prevalence of forced recruitment by opposition groups
- 2.2. Prevalence of civilians being forced by the opposition groups to support them in the armed conflict.
- 2.3. Treatment of public servants by opposition groups
- 2.4. Issuance of documents by opposition groups

### 3. Exiting Syria

#### 3.1. Exiting Syria via Damascus Airport

- 3.1.1. Access to the airport, including security situation on the road to the airport
- 3.1.2. Required documentation
- 3.1.3. Prevalence of corruption
- 3.1.4. Authorities present at the airport

#### 3.2. Possible consequences of exiting Syria illegally

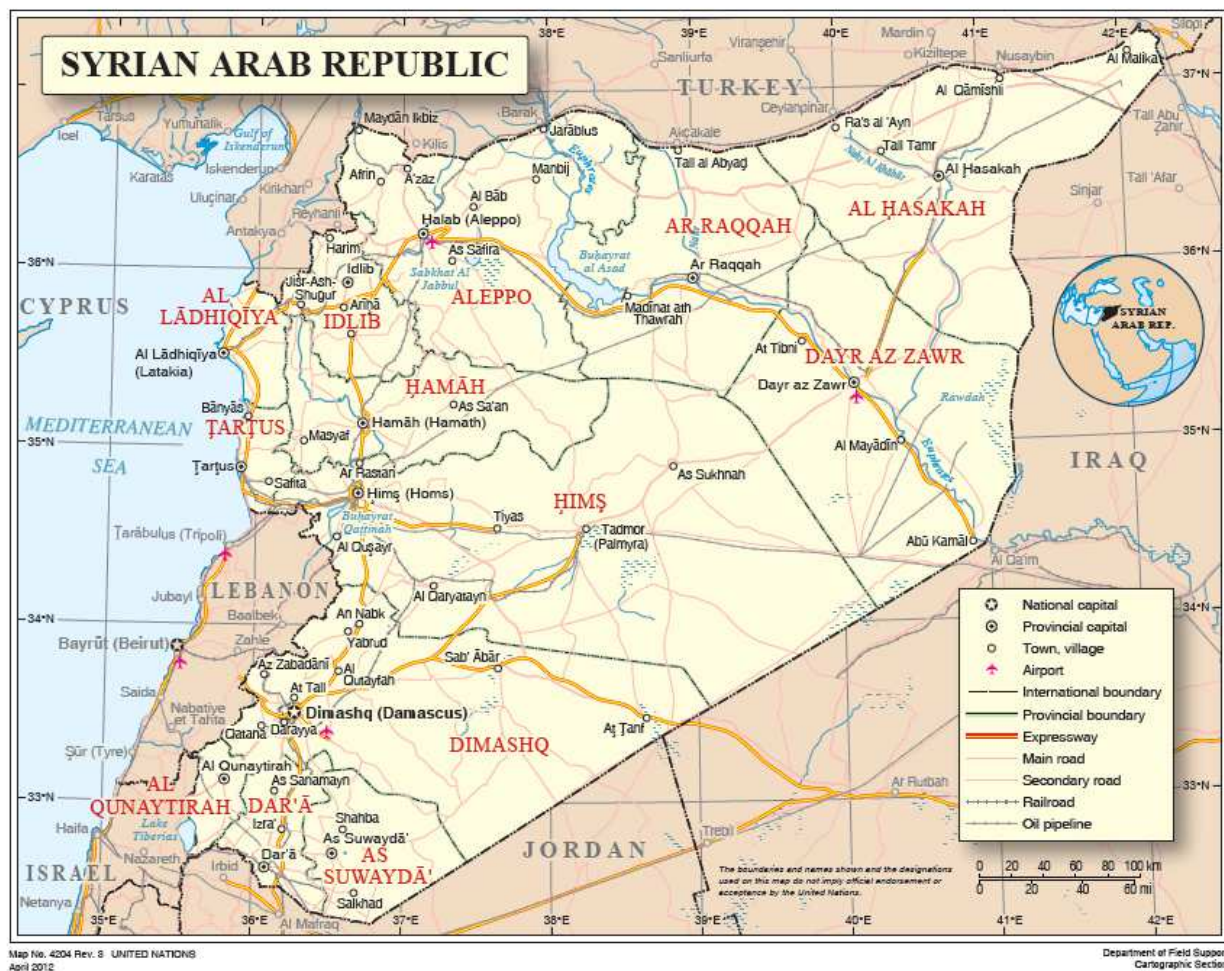
### 4. Documents

- 4.1. Civil documentation needed in Syria, for movement within Syria and for access to services



## Annex C: Map of Syria

Syria reference map 2012.<sup>220</sup>



<sup>220</sup> UN Geospatial Information Section (UN Cartographic Section) Syria general map, 2012