



## Country of Origin Information Report Syria

### The security situation

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## Introduction

This country of origin information report describes the security situation in Syria. The reporting period runs from May 2018 to May 2019. As far as possible, the most significant developments up to the time of the report's publication in July 2019 have been included. Given the period covered, this report is therefore an update of the description of the security situation in the country of origin information report (thematisch ambtsbericht) on Syria of June 2018. For an overview of compulsory military service and related subjects, see the country of origin report (thematisch ambtsbericht) issued in December 2016. For information on Syrian documents, see the October 2017 country of origin information report (thematisch ambtsbericht) on this subject. These reports have been published in Dutch only.

This report is based on information from both public and confidential sources. Use has been made of information from non-governmental organisations, Letters to Parliament (in Dutch only), specialist literature and media reporting. The public sources consulted are included in the list of references.

The report is also based on information obtained on a fact-finding mission to Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, and reports from the Dutch representations in these countries. These findings are treated as confidential sources.

Reporting (in public sources) on violent incidents can vary greatly: for example, there can be differences regarding the number of victims. Information about the ongoing struggle, perpetrators, victim tallies and other related subjects is virtually impossible to verify independently and is not comprehensive. Where possible, information has been verified through confidential sources. This report must therefore be read in the context of a very fluid situation, in which, moreover, all the different parties stand to benefit from certain reporting which is favourable to them. In addition, media coverage of Syria regularly uses terms such as 'extremists', 'moderates', and 'jihadists'. In this report, the term 'armed group' is used in principle, unless a particular group appears on a UN or EU list as a terrorist group, such as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) or ISIS.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the security situation throughout the country. A distinction is made between the areas under the control of the Syrian authorities, the Kurds and other groups. This chapter also describes human rights violations and the consequences of the conflict for the humanitarian situation.

Chapter 2 examines the situation in the Kurdish region in north-eastern Syria.

Conscription and other military aspects of the armed conflict in Syria are dealt with in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 describes the situation regarding internally displaced persons and the return of Syrians from abroad or from a displacement situation.



# 1 The security situation

## 1.1 Political developments

Bashar al-Assad has been president of Syria since 2000. The last presidential elections were held in 2014, when the opposition controlled a large part of Syria. Only Syrians in government areas were able to vote.<sup>1</sup> The last parliamentary elections took place in 2016, on the same basis, for a parliamentary term of four years.<sup>2</sup>

### *Civil war*

What began as a civil uprising in the Arab Spring in March 2011 has developed since 2012 into a conflict between the Syrian authorities and various armed groups. The violence escalated as a result of the bloody and brutal response of the Syrian government to the peaceful demonstrations of 2011 and the release of militant jihadists. From 2014, the international struggle against the terrorist organisation ISIS<sup>3</sup> was added to the mix, and the situation in Syria became a complex armed conflict with a number of Syrian and foreign parties. Various parties vied for power in shifting alliances. Russia, Iran and the Lebanese *Hezbollah* were involved in the conflict as allies of the Syrian authorities. Turkey, the US and other Western and Arab allies supported opposition factions in northern and southern Syria.

In the north-east and south of the country – and in Iraq – a US-led international coalition fought ISIS.<sup>4</sup> In the first few years after the uprising the opposition conquered large territories, but in recent years the Syrian authorities have managed to regain control over much of the country, thanks to military support from Russia and Iran. This has usually been accompanied by widespread violence, causing thousands of Syrian civilian casualties.<sup>5</sup> The civil war and the fight against ISIS have led to a divided country under the control of rival national armies and their local allies. The complicated relationships between these armies and their irreconcilable interests have caused division, poverty and violence.<sup>6</sup>

### *International mediation*

Since the outbreak of the civil war, the international community has made efforts to find a political solution to the conflict. However, neither the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Resolution 2218 of 27 September 2013 calling for a transitional government including both members of the incumbent government and the opposition, nor successive UN peace conferences in Geneva have produced results.<sup>7</sup> On 18 December 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2254. The resolution called for a UN-led political transition process which would lead to credible governance in which all Syrians would be represented. The

<sup>1</sup> Sadiki, Larbi, ed. *Routledge handbook of the Arab Spring: rethinking democratization*. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Bashar al-Assad*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bashar-al-Assad> last updated: 4 June 2019, consulted on 7 June 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Since the proclamation of a cross-border caliphate in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has called itself 'Islamic State' (IS). ISIS is also referred to as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or *Daesh/Da'ish* (the Arabic name of ISIS, in full: *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*). In this report the organisation will be referred to as ISIS.

<sup>4</sup> Sadiki, Larbi, ed. *Routledge handbook of the Arab Spring: rethinking democratization*. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 570,000 people died between 2011 and 2019. SOHR, *More than 570 thousand people were killed on the Syrian territory within 8 years of revolution demanding freedom, democracy, justice, and equality*, 15 March 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Prospects for Syria in 2019*, 12 November 2018.

<sup>7</sup> UNSC, *S/RES/2218*, 27 September 2013; Lundgren, Magnus. "Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011–2016." *Contemporary Security Policy* 37.2 (2016): 273–288.

process would also lead to a new constitution and free elections under the auspices of the UN.<sup>8</sup> Due to lack of cooperation from the Syrian government, this process had not achieved the intended result at the time of writing.

### *The opposition in exile*

While Islamic fundamentalists now largely dominate the military opposition in Syria, the Syrian opposition in exile is divided.<sup>9</sup> The opposition in exile is brought together in several umbrella organisations or platforms. The *Syrian Opposition Coalition*<sup>10</sup> (SOC) is a political platform based in Istanbul and representing various Syrian opposition groups.<sup>11</sup> In addition, on 3 April 2013, the Syrian opposition established an executive body, the *Syrian Interim Government* (SIG), which operates from southern Turkey.<sup>12</sup> On 25 April 2019, the SIG opened an office in Al-Rai in the Turkish-controlled *Euphrates Shield Zone*.<sup>13</sup> In 2014, the negotiations in Geneva were conducted by the SOC on behalf of part of the opposition, on the basis of UNSC Resolution 2118.<sup>14</sup>

In November 2015 the *High Negotiations Committee* (HNC) was set up – an umbrella group comprising members of the *National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces*, the *National Coordination Body for Democratic Change*, the *Kurdish National Council* (KNC) and groups from the network of the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA).<sup>15</sup> In 2016 and 2017, the HNC led the negotiations on behalf of the opposition on the basis of UN Resolution 2254.<sup>16</sup> The HNC had to constantly strike a balance between the ambitions and slogans of the Syrian revolution, developments on the ground and the constant policy changes of regional friends and enemies. The Syrian government did not cooperate in the negotiations and criticised the HNC's failure to include any of the less outspoken opposition groups such as the Syrian opposition in Moscow and Cairo. In response, the HNC was replaced by a hybrid committee of the Syrian opposition and persons who did not belong to the hard core of the opposition, known as the *Syrian Negotiations Committee* (SNC).<sup>17</sup> Since the establishment of the SNC, the UN has tried in vain to get the SNC and the Syrian government to come to Geneva.<sup>18</sup> In Astana, however (see below), the opposition delegation consisted of representatives of armed groups, such as Jaysh al-Islam.<sup>19</sup>

### *Astana talks*

On 20 December 2016, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to hold joint peace talks concerning Syria in Astana (Kazakhstan) on the basis of UN Resolution 2254.<sup>20</sup> On 23 December 2016, representatives of the Assad government and leaders of the Syrian armed groups – representing more than twelve factions – met in Astana.<sup>21</sup> A

<sup>8</sup> UN SC/12171, *Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks*, 18 December 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Una.org, *The complex state of Syria's opposition*, January 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Its full name is the *National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces* (E'tilaf). See <http://en.etilaf.org/>. See also <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See the General Official Report on Syria of June 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Carnegie's Middle East Centre, *The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem*, 3 April 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, *Opposition 'Coalition' Opens First Office Near Syria's Aleppo*, 25 April 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Sharqforum.org, *The Higher Negotiation Committee and Syrian Negotiation Committee*, 25 May 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Una.org, *The complex state of Syria's opposition*, January 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Sharqforum.org, *The Higher Negotiation Committee and Syrian Negotiation Committee*, 25 May 2018.

<sup>17</sup> This new version was devised by Saudi diplomats in the absence of the Turks or Qataris. Sharqforum.org, *The Higher Negotiation Committee and Syrian Negotiation Committee*, 25 May 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Una.org, *The complex state of Syria's opposition*, January 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Dalton, Melissa. "Defeating terrorism in Syria: A new way forward." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 16 (2017).

<sup>21</sup> The HNC and SNC did not participate as organisations in Astana at any point. Dalton, Melissa. "Defeating terrorism in Syria: A new way forward." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 16 (2017).



further meeting in Astana followed on 23 and 24 January 2017, at which Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire. However, the final declaration was not signed by the armed groups, led by Mohammad Alloush<sup>22</sup>, or by the government delegation, led by Bashar Jaafari. Subsequent discussions in Astana likewise yielded no results. In May 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey, the '*Astana guarantors*', adopted a Russian proposal in Astana for the establishment of four 'de-escalation zones' across Syria, with checkpoints that would be jointly manned by troops of the 'guarantors'. Under the proposal, pro-government forces and rebels would lay down all weapons. However, from the beginning of 2018, pro-government forces, supported by Russia and Iranian militias, recaptured three of the four de-escalation zones, mainly through heavy bombing that led to the surrender of the opposition groups.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Constitutional committee*

On 30 January 2018, at a peace conference organised by the Russian Federation in Sochi, the former UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, approved a proposal by the '*Astana guarantors*' (Russia, Turkey and Iran) to establish a constitutional committee. This committee would be formed from three lists: a list of the Syrian authorities, an opposition list and a list of independents. The UN was to compile the third, non-political, list of NGOs, independents, tribal leaders and women, albeit with input from and the agreement of the Syrian government and the opposition.<sup>24</sup> The 150-strong constitutional committee, 30% of whose members would be women, would focus on one of the elements of UN Resolution 2254, a new constitution.<sup>25</sup> The Assad government submitted a list, as did opposition groups in exile, although many factions operating in Syria itself are not represented on this second list.<sup>26</sup> De Mistura was supposed to draw up a list of 'neutral' candidates.<sup>27</sup> However, the Syrian government refused to accept this third list if it did not include six pro-Assad candidates. On 17 October 2018, the then UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura announced that he wished to finalise the establishment of the constitutional committee before his departure at the end of November 2018.<sup>28</sup> However, at the Astana conference at the end of November 2018, Russia, Turkey and Iran failed to make any progress in setting up the committee.<sup>29</sup> The current UN special envoy Geir Pederson is working to resolve the problem of the third list for the

<sup>22</sup> The political representative of the Jaysh al-Islam faction.

<sup>23</sup> Dalton, Melissa. "Defeating terrorism in Syria: A new way forward." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 16 (2017). On the de-escalation zones, see also the Dutch COI report on Syria of June 2018.

<sup>24</sup> The opposition strongly criticised De Mistura because it saw the conference as an attempt to replace the UN Peace Process and to marginalise the role of the opposition. Turkish-supported opposition groups that had travelled to Sochi refused to leave the airport in protest at pro-regime symbols such as the flag of the Assad government, which flew at the airport and was displayed by the roads and in the conference room. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019; Oxford Analytica, *The push for accord on a Syrian transition may falter*, 23 October 2018.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13556.doc.htm>; Oxford Analytica, *The push for accord on a Syrian transition may falter*, 23 October 2018; Confidential source, 24 July 2018.

<sup>26</sup> The UN has had great difficulty compiling a list that is acceptable to Damascus. There are also differences between Russia, the US and European countries about the composition of the list. UN News, *Damascus Has Rejected Prospective Members of Proposed Constitutional Committee, Special Envoy for Syria Tells Security Council in Briefing*, 26 October 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Syria will resist a push for a transitional committee*, 18 October 2018; Oxford Analytica, *The push for accord on a Syrian transition may falter*, 23 October 2018.

<sup>27</sup> 'Neutral' candidates were supposed to make up one-third of the members of the committee, in addition to the candidates from the opposition and the regime. De Mistura needed to ensure that these people were not affiliated with the regime, which was not supposed to have the power to block progress on the committee. Confidential source, 24 July 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Staffan de Mistura announced on 17 October 2018 that he would resign at the end of November for personal reasons. De Mistura is the third UN mediator in the Syrian conflict, which has lasted for more than seven years now. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13543.doc.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Dalton, Melissa. "Defeating terrorism in Syria: A new way forward." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 16 (2017); RFE/RL, *UN Syria Envoy Calls Astana Talks On Syria 'Missed Opportunity'*, 29 November 2018.

constitutional committee. The matter was not yet resolved at the time of the Astana conference in late April 2019.<sup>30</sup>

#### *De-escalation zones*

In 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey designated four de-escalation zones, mainly in areas controlled by the opposition, to put an end to hostilities between the armed opposition groups and pro-government forces. The first zone included the province of Idlib and areas in the north-east of the province of Latakia, the west of the province of Aleppo and the north of the province of Hama. The second zone consisted of the Rastan and Talbiseh enclaves in the north of the province of Homs, the third zone was eastern Ghouta to the north-east of Damascus and the fourth zone was the insurgent-controlled area along the border with Jordan, with large parts of the provinces of Dara'a and Quneitra.<sup>31</sup> However, the ceasefire was breached in these zones, especially by the Syrian authorities and to a lesser extent by the opposition groups. Only in the de-escalation zone in southern Syria – where a separate ceasefire was agreed by the US, Russia and Jordan – did the agreements lead to a reduction in fighting from July 2017 to June 2018.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Recapture of opposition areas*

After the Syrian authorities, with the support of the Russian Federation in particular, had retaken the area occupied by the opposition in the former de-escalation zones in the north of Homs province<sup>33</sup> and in East Damascus in the first half of 2018,<sup>34</sup> resulting in many deaths and injuries,<sup>35</sup> the Syrian government left the Idlib escalation zone alone for the time being,<sup>36</sup> and Damascus turned its attention to the southern de-escalation zone.<sup>37</sup> On 17 June 2018, pro-government forces launched Operation Basalt to recapture southern Syria from the armed groups of the Southern Front.<sup>38</sup>

By means of this operation, the Syrian government regained full control not just along the border with Jordan,<sup>39</sup> but along the ceasefire line with Israel too. This

<sup>30</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, *Putin, Erdogan Coordinate on Astana Talks, Syria Constitutional Committee*, 9 April 2019; Dalton, Melissa. "Defeating terrorism in Syria: A new way forward." *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 16 (2017).

<sup>31</sup> In July 2017, the US, Russia and Jordan had also signed a separate ceasefire agreement relating to the de-escalation zone in the south. Hinnebusch, Raymond, and Omar Imady. "Syria's reconciliation agreements." (2017).

<sup>32</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> The enclave of Rastan and Talbiseh in northern Homs. Reuters, *Syrian rebels pull out of their last besieged area*, 16 May 2018.

<sup>34</sup> VOA, *Russia: Last of Eastern Ghouta Under Syrian Control*, 12 April 2018.

<sup>35</sup> VOA, *Russia: Last of Eastern Ghouta Under Syrian Control*, 12 April 2018; Al Jazeera, *Eastern Ghouta, what happened and why*, 14 April 2018

<sup>36</sup> Much of the province of Idlib and areas in the north-east of the province of Latakia, the west of the province of Aleppo and the north of the province of Hama.

<sup>37</sup> In July 2017, the US, Russia and Jordan had also signed a separate ceasefire agreement relating to the de-escalation zone in the south. Hinnebusch, Raymond, and Omar Imady. "Syria's reconciliation agreements." (2017); Parliamentary Document 27 925, no. 637 (06-11-2018).

<sup>38</sup> The Southern Front was an alliance established in February 2014 of more than fifty unstructured armed opposition groups associated with the *Free Syrian Army*. For details, see the Dutch COI report on Syria of June 2018. For more information see OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 2 (as of 26 June 2018)*, 2 July 2018; IRIN, *UN fears new Syrian offensive could stand up to 200,000 civilians*, 25 June 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 3*, 19 July 2018; Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> On 6 July 2018, the Syrian army took Nassib, an important border crossing with Jordan in the Dara'a region. Armed vehicles flying Syrian and Russian flags made their way to the border crossing. RFE/RL, *Russia-Backed Syrian Forces Take Key Border Site After Deal With Rebels*, 6 July 2018. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

rapid success was due not only to Russian air support<sup>40</sup>, but to the decrease in support from the foreign financial backers, the US, the UK, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for the Southern Front combat groups.<sup>41</sup> After the pro-government forces had captured the provinces of Dara'a<sup>42</sup> and Quneitra<sup>43</sup>, they conducted a military campaign in the province of Al-Sweida against ISIS fighters in that area.<sup>44</sup> After Damascus had advanced in the south, Jordan sought economic advantage by the reopening of trade routes and other measures. Some refugees were already returning to Syria, although the UN and the EU did not regard it as safe to do so.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Last opposition stronghold under fire*

After the Syrian authorities had regained full control of the Yarmouk Basin, an area bordering Israel and Jordan in the south, at the end of July 2018, Assad then threatened to occupy the last remaining de-escalation zone, Idlib, and to expel the Turkish troops in the area, who had twelve observation posts there. Under the de-escalation arrangements, Turkey was supervising the area around Idlib,<sup>46</sup> which was the opposition's last major stronghold. Following the reconquest of resistance areas in other parts of the country, Idlib was acting as a last place of refuge: fighters who surrendered after the siege of Dara'a were sent to the province in buses with their families. As a result, in early August 2018, it was estimated that more than 400,000 displaced persons were in Idlib<sup>47</sup>, including extremists, activists and moderate opposition members, who rejected any deal with the Damascus regime.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>40</sup> After negotiations between the Russians and rebels about the surrender of heavy weapons, the return of refugees and a local defence force came to nothing, Damascus and Moscow intensified their bombing: within fifteen hours they had carried out 600 strikes from the air. Under the leadership of Jordan, the surrender of the Syrian rebels was negotiated. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> In exchange for the surrender of their heavy weapons, the opposition leaders in Dara'a were evacuated to Idlib province; RFE/RL, *Monitoring Group Says Russian Jets Aid Syria In New Assault*, 24 June 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Israel and Jordan have interests in Syria settlement*, 9 July 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 3*, 19 July 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Dara'a is the capital of the province of the same name in south-western Syria, known as the birthplace of the uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which began in 2011 and turned into a civil war. After fierce fighting on 12 July 2018, the city of Dara'a also fell into the hands of government forces. At that point, the government once again had control of the entire city and over eighty percent of the surrounding province of the same name. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> On 15 July 2018, the Syrian army recaptured the village of Mashara with the help of air strikes, a first step in an offensive to retake the province of Quneitra. On 20 July 2018, the evacuation began of insurgents from the northern part of the province of Quneitra, where there were more moderate rebels. They were taken to the northern province of Idlib, which was still in the hands of the Syrian opposition. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> On 30 July 2018, after days of bombing, the Syrian army claimed victory over a group of ISIS fighters that had stayed behind near the Israeli border. However, according to the British newspaper The Guardian, the ISIS fighters who attacked Sweida came from the east, having travelled there from the Yarmouk camp, a Palestinian district in Damascus, following an exchange agreement with the Syrian army. OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation in Dara'a, Qunaitra and As-Sweida Governorates- Situation Report No. 6*, 18 August 2019; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/druze-communities-face-a-regional-decline-in-influence>.

<sup>45</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR appeals for safe passage for civilians in southern Syria, says international standards on refugee returns essential*, 18 July 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Syria-Lebanon ties may warm fast under Russian aegis*, 26 July 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019; Oxford Analytica, *Turkey faces multiple pressures in Syria's Idlib*, 1 August 2018.

<sup>47</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-flash-update-recent-events-9-august-2018>.

<sup>48</sup> The influx of displaced persons from other parts of Syria had swelled the civilian population of Idlib to around 2.5 million. In 2011, there were around 1.5 million people living in Idlib. Central Bureau of Statistics, *Syrian Arab Republic*; Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

On 1 September 2018, the Russian Mediterranean Fleet began a large-scale exercise in which more than 25 warships and support vessels took part.<sup>49</sup> On 4 September 2018, the first Russian air strikes on Idlib began; they lasted three weeks. Armed insurgents tried to find new recruits, and destroyed bridges to defend the area.<sup>50</sup> President Erdogan warned that an attack on the more than three million residents of Idlib could result in a massacre. Turkey also feared a mass influx of refugees.<sup>51</sup>

#### *International consultations*

In August 2018, there was constant consultation between Russian and Turkish generals. In Moscow, US President Trump's security adviser John Bolton warned against a Syrian government offensive in Idlib which might involve the use of chemical weapons.<sup>52</sup> On 4 September 2018, Turkey sent reinforcements to the border with Syria to prevent a new flow of refugees.<sup>53</sup> The UN Security Council met on 7 September 2018 to discuss the situation in Idlib. That same day, Russian President Putin spoke in Iran with his Turkish counterpart Erdogan and Iranian President Rohani about ending the civil war in Syria.<sup>54</sup> However, they were unable to reach agreement on a truce.<sup>55</sup> After the failed summit, Syrian and Russian fighter planes bombarded targets in the south of Idlib province on 8 and 9 September 2018.<sup>56</sup>

#### *The Sochi Agreement*

On 17 September 2018, Russia and Turkey signed an agreement to end the offensive in the Syrian province of Idlib.<sup>57</sup> At a summit in the Russian seaside resort of Sochi, to which France and Germany were also invited,<sup>58</sup> Turkish President Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Putin agreed on the establishment of a 'demilitarised zone' around Idlib to prevent further fighting between pro-government forces and rebels. The two countries agreed to establish and control a demilitarised zone, extending 15 to 20 kilometres from the front line, by 15 October 2018 at the

<sup>49</sup> Many of the ships were equipped with cruise missiles, which had already previously been used to bombard rebel positions. Vessels from the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea Fleets all participated in the exercise. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019; Oxford Analytica, *Russia deploys navy to show and use power in Syria*, 3 September 2018;

<sup>50</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria's inevitable Idlib assault has major risks*, 4 September 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.; Oxford Analytica, *Turkey will rely on summit to avert Syrian catastrophe*, 5 September 2018; Oxford Analytica, *A Tehran deal on Syria will likely be unsustainable*, 7 September 2018.

<sup>52</sup> In response, the Russian Ministry of Defence issued warnings on an almost daily basis of an impending 'provocation': a poison gas attack by – according to the Russians – 'jihadists' on their own population in Idlib, intended to bring Assad into disrepute. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> According to Erdogan, Assad was dishonestly using the fight against terrorism to attack the three million people who live in Idlib province, not all of whom, he claimed, were extremists. WSJ, *The World must stop Assad*, 10 September 2018; Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> In early September 2018, the Russian Foreign Minister had described Idlib as a 'hotbed of terrorists' and a 'purulent abscess' that needed to be cut out. However, Russia was looking for a compromise with Turkey, which had a strategic interest in preventing a military operation, resulting in an influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees, including Salafi jihadists who would go underground. Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>58</sup> These countries did not attend, but did participate in a follow-up conference in Turkey. MEM, *Syria opposition rejects Idlib demilitarisation amid uncertainty over Sochi deal*, 2 October 2018; France24, *Turkey to host Syria summit with Russia, France and Germany*, 19 October 2018.

latest.<sup>59</sup> The agreement between Russia and Turkey on Idlib imposed two deadlines on fighters in and around Idlib. By 10 October 2018, they should have removed all their heavy weapons from the horseshoe-shaped zone, which was approximately twenty kilometres wide.<sup>60</sup> All jihadist rebels should have left by 15 October 2018; the moderate fighters, who were supported by Turkey, were allowed to stay. The rebels seemed to have met the first deadline. The *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* (SOHR) reported on 10 October 2018 that heavy weaponry was no longer observable in the buffer area. The second deadline, however, was not met. According to the SOHR, the extremist rebels had no intention of leaving the area around Idlib.<sup>61</sup> The agreement was rumoured to have caused splits within HTS. The clerics gave priority to spreading the Salafi jihadist ideology, whereas military commanders put the organisation's survival first. The second wing prevailed, following the more opportunistic approach of leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Withdrawal of American troops*

On 19 December 2018, President Trump announced that ISIS had been defeated in Syria and that the US would withdraw all ground forces (two thousand troops). Trump thus fulfilled a 2016 election promise: he had said that the US should not become the 'policeman of the Middle East'.<sup>63</sup> Germany, France and the UK criticised Trump's decision, with French President Macron commenting that 'you should be able to count on an ally'.

France indicated that it would maintain its military presence in Syria.<sup>64</sup> According to the EU, ISIS has not been defeated and the movement still represents a threat in Syria and beyond.<sup>65</sup>

Following Trump's decision, the US Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, and the US envoy to the international coalition against ISIS, Brett McGurk, resigned.<sup>66</sup> Russian President Putin welcomed President Trump's decision, and Turkish President Erdogan

<sup>59</sup> Although the Sochi Agreement was in theory only about the demilitarised zone, it became clear that Turkey had been given the task of differentiating the moderate rebels from the extremists throughout Idlib and disarming the latter. Russia's role was to ensure that the Syrian authorities did not launch any attacks. Turkish and Russian soldiers would conduct joint patrols in the zone. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019; Oxford Analytica, *Syria deal can only briefly postpone the Idlib assault*, 18 September 2018.

<sup>60</sup> This is a part of the de-escalation zone of which no map has been published.

<sup>61</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> For more information about the situation in Idlib, see pages 26-32. Oxford Analytica, *Turkish push will stoke infighting in Syria's Idlib*, 27 September 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>63</sup> The White House and the Pentagon also stated that the international campaign against ISIS was not over yet. Mahmood, Nazish, and Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. "Trump and the US Foreign Policy Crisis." *Strategic Studies* 38.4 (2018).; RFE/RL, *Trump's Syria Withdrawal Announcement Criticized By Allies, Praised By Putin*, 20 December 2019; Oxford Analytica, *US Syria troop pull-out implies many risks*, 20 December 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Mahmood, Nazish, and Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. "Trump and the US Foreign Policy Crisis." *Strategic Studies* 38.4 (2018); Oxford Analytica, *Europe faces pressure to strengthen Syria policy*, 24 December 2018.

<sup>65</sup> On 7 January 2019, ISIS carried out a suicide attack on a building of the SDF municipal council in Raqqa, killing at least five people and injuring more than twenty. Oxford Analytica, *Europe faces pressure to strengthen Syria policy*, 24 December 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Syria suicide attack will bolster critics of US policy*, 9 January 2019. For more details, see the Letter to Parliament of 14 January 2019 (Parliamentary document 27 925 no. 647) and the progress report of 18 April 2019 on the Dutch contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition and the broader security deployment in Iraq in 2019. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-27925-647.html>.

<sup>66</sup> McGurk had stated on 11 December 2018 that the withdrawal of troops at that point would be reckless. US officials had previously stated that the US would remain in the north-east, even after IS was defeated, to train the security service of the SDF to maintain security in the area. US policymakers had also stated that the US should stay in the area for longer in order to diminish Iranian influence in the country. RFE/RL, *France's Macron Chides Trump, Saying An Ally Should Be 'Dependable'*, 23 December 2018; RFE/RL, *Trump Defends Syria Pullout After U.S. Envoy's Protest Resignation*, 23 December 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Kurds may be forced to align with Damascus*, 24 December 2018; RFE/RL, *Pentagon Withdrawal Order For U.S. Troops From Syria 'Signed'*, 24 December 2018; RFE/RL, *Trump Declares End To U.S. 'Policeman' Role During Surprise Visits To Troops In Iraq, Germany*, 26 December 2018. Mahmood, Nazish, and Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. "Trump and the US Foreign Policy Crisis." *Strategic Studies* 38.4 (2018).

announced a military offensive to drive the US-supported Kurdish militia, the *Kurdish People's Protection Units* (YPG), and ISIS out of Syria.<sup>67</sup> Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that Trump's decision would not prevent Israel from stopping Iran from gaining a permanent foothold in Syria.<sup>68</sup>

The *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF), mainly led by Syrian Kurds, were very concerned and warned that the decision could lead to a revival of ISIS.<sup>69</sup> Anticipating a possible US withdrawal, they established contacts with the government in Damascus.<sup>70</sup> According to local social media, the Syrian government and pro-Iranian militias were already deploying troops along the west bank of the Euphrates.<sup>71</sup> The Kurds rebelled against Assad in 2011, but like him they do not wish to have Turkish troops on Syrian territory.<sup>72</sup> However, the contacts between Damascus and the SDF do not seem to have resulted in any further cooperation or agreement. Reportedly, Damascus does not want to make significant concessions to the Kurds over autonomy.<sup>73</sup>

President Trump's decision to withdraw his troops was the prelude to a thawing of relations between Turkey and Russia on the one hand and between Turkey and the US on the other.<sup>74</sup> Turkey and Iran also sought contact with each other.<sup>75</sup> The Turkish government had been fiercely opposed from the outset to US cooperation with the Syrian-Kurdish militia YPG, a sister organisation of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK, which is engaged in an armed struggle against the Turkish government. However, Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton stated on 6 January 2019 that US forces will remain in Syria until ISIS is completely defeated, Iranian troops have left Syria, and the YPG's security is guaranteed.<sup>76</sup> President Erdogan stated that he would not accept any US conditions for Turkey's military role in Syria, at which President Trump threatened on 13 January 2019 to 'devastate Turkey economically' if it attacked the Kurds in northern Syria.<sup>77</sup> At the end of the reporting period, talks

<sup>67</sup> RFE/RL, *U.S. Defense Chief Mattis Resigns In Protest At Trump Policies*, 21 December 2018; RFE/RL, *Erdogan Vows To 'Remove' Kurdish Militia, IS From Syria After U.S. Withdrawal*, 21 December 2019

<sup>68</sup> RFE/RL, *Netanyahu: Israel Able To Contain Iran In Syria After U.S. Pullout*, 24 December 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Mahmood, Nazish, and Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema. "Trump and the US Foreign Policy Crisis." *Strategic Studies* 38.4 (2018); Jenkins, Peter S. "Donald Trump and the Future of American Foreign Policy: Syria, Iran and North Korea." *War and Happiness*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019. 319-329. See also article about SDF: The Defense Post, *ISIS's 'caliphate' was crushed. Now Syria's Kurd-led alliance faces bigger battles*, 29 March 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Gunes, Cengiz. "Developments in the Kurdish Issue in Syria and Turkey in 2017." *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 16.1 (2019): 211-229.

<sup>71</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Kurds may be forced to align with Damascus*, 24 December 2018.

<sup>72</sup> In early January 2019, Turkish-supported militias gathered around the city of Manbij, occupied by the YPG. However, the Syrian defence minister stated on 2 January 2018 that the YPG had begun withdrawing from Manbij after handing over the city to Damascus in exchange for protection. According to government officials, about 400 YPG fighters had already left. Alam, Kamal. "Pax Syria: The staying power of Bashar al Assad", *Asian Affairs* (2019): 1-17. Oxford Analytica, *US confusion will encourage others to act in Syria*, 3 January 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Gunes, Cengiz. "Developments in the Kurdish Issue in Syria and Turkey in 2017." *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 16.1 (2019): 211-229.; AFP, *Syrie : les Kurdes refusent les accords de "réconciliation" du régime*, 3 May 2019.

<sup>74</sup> The American withdrawal from Syria led to feverish diplomatic consultations. Turkish President Erdogan held telephone consultations with President Trump several times in early 2019. Erdogan consulted with President Putin on 23 January 2019. Turkey feared that a power vacuum would arise after the US withdrawal and wanted to establish a 32-kilometre-wide Turkish buffer zone along the border in north-eastern Syria. Oxford Analytica, *Trump leaves field to Putin and Erdogan in Syria*, 27 December 2018; Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>75</sup> On 19 and 20 December 2018 President Hassan Rouhani visited Ankara; during the visit, President Erdogan promised to increase bilateral trade with Iran from USD 8 billion to USD 30 billion and to ignore US sanctions. Oxford Analytica, *Trump leaves field to Putin and Erdogan in Syria*, 27 December 2018.

<sup>76</sup> RFE/RL, *Bolton Says U.S. Syria Withdrawal Conditioned On IS Defeat, Turkish Protection For Kurds*, 6 January 2019; Jenkins, Peter S. "Donald Trump and the Future of American Foreign Policy: Syria, Iran and North Korea." *War and Happiness*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019. 319-329; RFE/RL, *Putin, Erdogan Plan Meeting 'Soon' On U.S. Plan To Exit Syria*, 7 January 2019

<sup>77</sup> Oxford Analytica, *US presence in Syria is Kurds' guarantee against Turks*, 8 January 2019; RFE/RL, *Erdogan Rejects U.S. Request For Assurances On Kurdish Fighters*, 8 January 2019;

took place between the US and Turkey about establishing a security mechanism on the north-eastern border of Syria.<sup>78</sup>

### *Israel*

The Golan Heights were Syrian territory until the Six Day War in 1967. In 1974, Syria and Israel agreed on a ceasefire line, with a buffer zone that has had to be monitored by a UN force since then.<sup>79</sup> Israel then annexed the area in 1981. After the start of Operation Basalt, the recapture of southern Syria, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu repeatedly stated that the original ceasefire line must be maintained. In other words, Israel would not accept the Syrian army, Iranian militias or the Hezbollah movement approaching the border. On 1 July 2018, Israel therefore started sending troop reinforcements towards the border.<sup>80</sup> Tension between Israel and Syria on the border subsequently increased. On 1 August 2018, the Israeli army killed seven ISIS fighters near the Israeli-Syrian border on the Golan Heights in an air strike.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, Russia was playing an increasingly important role as a mediator between Israel and Syria. On 2 August 2018, Moscow announced the deployment of military personnel at eight security posts on the Syrian side of the border on the Golan Heights. UN blue helmets also returned to the area, having withdrawn from the war zone a few years previously after some UN personnel were abducted and attacked.<sup>82</sup> On 25 March 2019, President Trump recognised the Golan Heights as part of Israel.<sup>83</sup>

### *Rapprochement by Arab states*

In 2011, Arab (as well as Western) leaders called for the departure of Bashar al-Assad. He was suspended by the Arab League and only able to visit Tehran and Moscow. During the reporting period, ties were renewed with some countries; the government in Damascus had to strike a balance between rewarding Iran for being a faithful ally during the civil war and finding a way to get investment from Gulf States in order to make a start on reconstruction. The *Syrian Investment Agency* reportedly liaised with Gulf States investors to implement projects approved prior to 2011.<sup>84</sup> On 15 October 2018, the border with Jordan near Nasib was opened for the first time since 2015.<sup>85</sup>

In December 2018, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir (subsequently deposed in April 2019) became the first Arab leader since 2011 to visit Damascus.<sup>86</sup> Al-Bashir's visit came after the Arab Parliament in Egypt<sup>87</sup> had issued a call on 14 December

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/01/15/could-united-states-crush-turkey-s-economy-pub-78126>. See also The Hoover Institution, *The US Role in the Middle East in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition*, 2 April 2019.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>

<sup>79</sup> Averbukh, L., & Klein, M. (2018). *Russia-Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict: political interests overshadow social and economic ties*.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Averbukh, L., & Klein, M. (2018). *Russia-Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict: political interests overshadow social and economic ties*. Parker, John W. *Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria*. National Defense University Press, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Averbukh, L., & Klein, M. (2018). *Russia-Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict: political interests overshadow social and economic ties*. Parker, John W. *Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria*. National Defense University Press, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/israel-and-syria-whither-now>.

<sup>84</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 6-16, 2018*; Oxford Analytica, *Gulf states will gradually rebuild Syria ties*, 4 December 2018.

<sup>85</sup> An estimated USD 1.5 billion worth of goods every year used to cross the border at Nasib, which connects Syria with Jordan and the Gulf States beyond. Oxford Analytica, *Border reopening will bolster Syria's normalisation*, 15 October 2018; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/border-opportunities-reviving-jordan-syria-free-trade-zone>.

<sup>86</sup> Alam, Kamal. "Pax Syriana: The staying power of Bashar al Assad", *Asian Affairs* (2019): 1-17.

<sup>87</sup> The *Arab Parliament* was established in 2004 during a summit conference of the Arab League in Algiers. It has its headquarters in Cairo. Note: The Arab parliament has nothing to do with Egypt's national parliament. See, for example, Arab News, *Arab Parliament classifies Houthis as a terrorist group, calls on UN and Arab League to do the same*, 19 June 2019.

2018 for the Arab League to re-admit Assad's government<sup>88</sup> On 27 December 2018, the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus. The same day saw the departure of the first direct flight from Tunisia to Syria in eight years.<sup>89</sup> By contrast, Saudi Arabia in particular, but also Egypt, remained strongly opposed to Assad, as an ally of their great adversary Iran, returning to the Arab League. Syria was still not a member of the League at the end of the reporting period.<sup>90</sup>

### *Reconstruction*

Eight years of war since 2011 have caused serious damage to buildings and infrastructure throughout the country. Estimates for the total costs of reconstruction vary from USD 195 to 250 billion. Areas that have suffered extreme damage are Raqqa, the eastern districts of Aleppo, Homs and the cities of Douma and Ghouta in Rif Dimashq. The destruction of houses, public buildings and power plants was ongoing in places such as Afrin, Dara'a and Idlib in mid-2018.

Syria is technically capable of taking on the reconstruction work, but lacks sufficient financial resources to do so. In May 2018, the Assad cabinet released USD 100 million for the reconstruction of 'newly liberated' areas.<sup>91</sup>

Allies of Damascus had neither the will nor the resources to finance the reconstruction, while those with financial resources (the US, the EU and the Gulf States) confined their support to humanitarian assistance.<sup>92</sup>

The EU and the US take the view that financial assistance for reconstruction can only be given if progress is made with the political transition process. So far Damascus has received little money from Tehran, Moscow or other allies for reconstruction. In addition to their military support, Iran and Russia have focused on strategic or economic interests such as Russian air and naval bases and exports to Iran of Syrian phosphate.<sup>93</sup>

## **1.2 The security situation**

In November 2018, Syria was de facto divided into territories controlled by the government with the support of Russia and Iran, territories controlled by armed groups supported by Turkey and territories controlled by US-backed groups.<sup>94</sup> ISIS rapidly lost ground in 2019. The last ISIS bastion fell in Baghouz on 23 March.<sup>95</sup> The opposition within the government area no longer had any independent power and no longer constituted a threat. The opposition's military strongholds, with the exception of Idlib, fell after the US, UK, Jordan and the Gulf States withdrew their material and diplomatic support. Some groups still had weapons and were in principle in favour of a change of the Syrian government led by President Assad, but were contained in the provinces (governorates) of Idlib and Aleppo, which were largely under the

<sup>88</sup> Al-Bashir is said to have flown to Damascus on a Russian plane. Oxford Analytica, *Sudanese visit likely heralds Syrian reintegration*, 17 December 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Oxford Analytica, *More Arab countries will reopen missions in Syria*, 27 December 2018; Alam, Kamal. "Pax Syria: The staying power of Bashar al Assad", *Asian Affairs* (2019): 1-17.

<sup>90</sup> The Financial Times, *As Arab States Normalize With Syria, Will This Push Them to Finance its Reconstruction?*, 24 January 2019; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syria-looks-rebuild-sanctions-remain-major-barrier-trade-and-investment>; Naharnet, *Bassil Raises Refugee File, Urges Giving Arab League Seat Back to Syria*, 16 April 2019; *The National*, *Middle Eastern nations must decide for themselves how to engage with Syria*, 21 May 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria will struggle more than Iraq with reconstruction*, 13 July 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Prospects for Syria in 2019*, 12 November 2018; The Atlantic, *No One Wants to Help Bashar al-Assad Rebuild Syria*, 15 March 2019; CSIS, *Rubble, Refugees, and Syria's Periphery*, 25 March 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria will struggle more than Iraq with reconstruction*, 13 July 2018.

<sup>94</sup> At the end of the reporting period, little had changed in overall terms, despite small shifts in the front line of the Idlib de-escalation zone.

<sup>95</sup> CNN, *ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says*, 23 March 2019.



control of HTS and the Turkish-backed NLF.<sup>96</sup> The primary objective of Turkish policy was no longer to end the regime of President Assad, but to ensure its own national security.<sup>97</sup>

### 1.2.1 *The provinces of Damascus and Rif Dimashq (Rural Damascus)*

Since the Syrian government regained full control over the provinces of Damascus and Rif Dimashq in May 2018, military action has ceased almost entirely. No shellings have taken place. On the other hand, the re-introduction of Syrian government control in the recaptured opposition areas has posed a threat to the security situation of citizens in those areas for other reasons.<sup>98</sup>

The Israeli army carried out bombardments of military installations at Damascus International Airport.<sup>99</sup>

In addition, a bomb blast occurred on 20 January 2019 at an office of the military intelligence service in the south of the city.<sup>100</sup> On 21 January 2019, the Abu Amara Brigades, an ally of HTS, set off a bomb at Kafr Sousa in South Damascus. The bombing targeted troops of the Syrian army. It is not known how many victims were involved in these attacks.<sup>101</sup> On 24 January 2019, a car bomb went off in the north-east of the city, close to the Russian embassy. A few people were injured.<sup>102</sup>

Security incidents resulting from remaining explosives going off in former combat zones such as Jobar, eastern Ghouta and Yarmouk have also been reported. In eastern Ghouta alone, where humanitarian sources indicated that the situation was very bad after years of siege, several people were injured in these blasts. The government has begun to clear rubble to one side in the main streets of Damascus, but there are still explosives among the rubble.<sup>103</sup>

In the suburbs of Damascus, a number of security incidents took place at the end of 2018, such as people firing at government checkpoints or a soldier being stabbed to death. In early November 2018, the security services arrested individuals who were about to commit a suicide attack.<sup>104</sup> On 24 April 2019, one person was killed by a suspected car bomb. Responsibility for the attack was not claimed.<sup>105</sup>

No security incidents occurred on the road from Damascus to the airport, apart from the Israeli bombing mentioned above. The previous obstructions on the road (checkpoints) were lifted in May 2019. In general, freedom of movement in the province of Damascus has increased since May 2018; the traffic flows smoothly.<sup>106</sup>

### *Checkpoints*

The number of checkpoints in the provinces, and especially within the city of Damascus, has been substantially reduced since May 2018. According to an international organisation, 90% of the checkpoints have been removed. The

<sup>96</sup> See Carnegie Endowment, *Turkey's Lack of Vision in Syria* by ferhat Gurini, Feb. 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78450>.

<sup>97</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Prospects for Syria in 2019*, 12 November 2018.

<sup>98</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-situation-overview-syria-hsos-rural-damascus-governorate-0>

<sup>99</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019; Reuters, *Syria says downs 'hostile targets' in suspected Israeli attack*, 29 November 2018; BBC, *Russia condemns 'Israeli' air strikes on Syria*, 26 December 2018; The Jerusalem Post, *Report: IDF strikes Iranian, Hezbollah targets near Damascus*, 12 January 2019; BBC, *Syria war: Israeli jets target Iranian positions around Damascus*, 21 January 2019.

<sup>100</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>101</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: January 10-23*, 25 January 2019.

<sup>102</sup> The Times of Israel, *Car bomb explodes near Russian embassy in Damascus*, 24 January 2019.

<sup>103</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ruptly, *Syria: Damascus car bomb kills one and injures five*, 24 April 2019.

<sup>106</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

remaining ones are mainly in the centre of the Old City and the Mezzeh district. At the entrances to the city, such as the motorways from Lebanon, the airport and the M5 motorway, there are also checkpoints. The number of checkpoints in former opposition areas in South Damascus has increased, as the government mistrusts the population there and wants to prevent security incidents. In former opposition areas such as eastern Ghouta, the road is occasionally closed in connection with raids to pick up conscription evaders.<sup>107</sup>

The checkpoints in the different zones in Damascus are manned by various security services<sup>108</sup> such as *al-Amn al-Dakheli* (part of the state security service *Amn al-Dawla*) and the military security service (*al-Amn al-Askari*), the military intelligence service, the air force intelligence service and various parts of the Syrian army, especially the fourth division and the Republican Guard. Hezbollah and Shiite militias man checkpoints in the Sayida Zainab area.<sup>109</sup>

According to sources, the controls within Damascus do not amount to much. Unless there is a security alert, cars and pedestrians are not checked. Identity documents are thoroughly checked at the entrances to the city. At the checkpoints in the province of Damascus this depends on which security service is present. According to one source, the air force intelligence service is the strictest.<sup>110</sup> On 24 April 2019, the *Saraya Qasioun* militia carried out a bomb attack on a member of the security forces in Nahr Aisha, a district in South Damascus. One civilian was killed and five others were injured.<sup>111</sup>

At permanent checkpoints at the entrance to the city and in parts of the province of Damascus, the authorities search for conscription evaders and individuals being sought for other reasons. According to one source, conscripts are no longer being actively sought<sup>112</sup>. However, if a conscript is found, he is sent directly to a military training camp. Before May 2018, the checks were mostly for weapons and car bombs, followed by 'undesirable persons', for example from eastern Ghouta or other former opposition areas.<sup>113</sup> Corruption and the payment of bribes at checkpoints are standard practice and contribute to insecurity and the lack of legal order.<sup>114</sup> In late March 2019, the Syrian government sent call-ups for military service to 5,000 young men in eastern Ghouta.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> The checkpoints of the security services in Damascus are usually equipped with laptops to check the conscription status of those passing through. Each security service has its own list of wanted persons and the various security services do not share these lists. In general, it is difficult for people to know how they stand with the government. However, it is possible for people with money or ties with the authorities to find out if their name appears on these lists. The intensity of inspections in the province of Damascus depends on which security service is present. According to one source, the air force intelligence service is the strictest. DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Sayyidah Zaynab, also known as Set Zaynab, is ten kilometres south of Damascus. DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>110</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Confidential source, 25 April 2019.

<sup>112</sup> This refers to the large-scale and arbitrary stopping of passers-by.

<sup>113</sup> During the recapture of the opposition area, 'reconciliation agreements' were concluded with the opposition. 'Reconciliation' is a euphemistic term used by the Syrian government; it includes the return of state institutions and various security services, and the investigations that residents undergo from these services in order to regularise their status before they are formally granted an amnesty. Once their status has been approved, residents are in principle removed from search lists and can move freely within the government area. However, according to the opposition, people with a recognised status may sometimes still appear on a list. ICG, *Middle East Report N°187 - Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 21 June 2018; DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Andersson, Staffan, and Frank Aneshiarico. *Corruption and corruption control: Democracy in the balance*. Routledge, 2019. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FP\\_20180626\\_beyond\\_fragility.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FP_20180626_beyond_fragility.pdf)

<sup>115</sup> During night-time raids, security forces picked up twelve conscription evaders. The Syrian Observer, *Assad Army Launches Conscription Campaign in Eastern Ghouta*, 2 April 2019.

*Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 2,548 civilian fatalities in the provinces of Damascus and Rif Dimashq, according to the SNHR. In the period January to April 2019, 29 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>116</sup>

1.2.2 *The provinces of Dara'a and Quneitra*

After the Syrian government had gained control of the centre of the country, including resistance hot spots in the outskirts of Damascus, in the first half of 2018, Operation Basalt was launched on 18 June 2018 with the aim of retaking southern Syria from the Southern Front.<sup>117</sup>

*Reconquest tactics*

During the previous reconquest of East Aleppo in December 2016 and eastern Ghouta in April 2018, Russian and Syrian tactics followed the same pattern: densely populated opposition areas were besieged and subject to heavy gunfire and bombing, invariably leading to large numbers of dead and injured. Humanitarian aid was not allowed into these areas, making starvation part of the military strategy.<sup>118</sup> In the end, the insurgents and the citizens had to choose either to surrender to the government or be transferred to insurgent-controlled areas in north-western Syria.<sup>119</sup>

The same tactics were employed in southern Syria. For ten days in a row, the government army (the *Syrian Arab Army* - SAA) and the Russian air force bombarded the area in south-western Syria controlled by armed opposition groups<sup>120</sup>, causing dozens of deaths and injuries. Health clinics, schools, shelters for civilians and offices of local NGOs were bombed.<sup>121</sup> On 23 and 24 June 2018, for example, a clinic and a shelter were destroyed in Bistr El-Harir and on 25 June 2018 a hospital in Hirak was hit.<sup>122</sup> Between 29 June and 1 July 2018, the local population in the towns of Jizeh, Mseifra, Sayda and Kahil Tiba left the area as a precaution for fear of attacks.<sup>123</sup> On 30 June 2018, a school in Ghasam was bombed, causing nine civilian deaths.<sup>124</sup> Within a few days, according to UNHCR, the number of displaced persons in south-western Syria rose to 270,000.<sup>125</sup> Tens of thousands of displaced persons were trapped on the border with Jordan and Israel.<sup>126</sup> Tens of thousands of

<sup>116</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>117</sup> In Dara'a, there was a civilian uprising in March 2011 following the serious abuse of several teenagers by the authorities. The protests led to a civil war that spread throughout Syria, and in which several other countries also became involved. IRIN, *UN fears new Syrian offensive could stand up to 200,000 civilians*, 25 June 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018; <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>.

<sup>118</sup> GRC, *Syria report*, June 2019.

<sup>119</sup> IRIN, *UN fears new Syrian offensive could stand up to 200,000 civilians*, 25 June 2018.

<sup>120</sup> The so-called non-state armed groups (NSAGs).

<sup>121</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 2*, 2 July 2018; UN News, *As many as 330,000 displaced by heavy fighting in south-west Syria – UN agency*, 3 July 2018.

<sup>122</sup> Forty percent of the houses in the city of Al-Karak were destroyed in artillery shelling. A clinic and a town hall were hit in East Maliha. The locality of Nawa was also bombed. RFE/RL, *Monitoring Group Says Russian Jets Aid Syria In New Assault*, 24 June 2018. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>; Ocha, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 2 (as of 26 June 2018)*, 2 July 2018; Ocha, *Jordan | Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 4*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>123</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 4*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>124</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 1*, 5 July 2018.

<sup>125</sup> IRIN, *UN fears new Syrian offensive could stand up to 200,000 civilians*, 25 June 2018; Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>126</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

displaced persons also sought refuge on the border between the Syrian part and the Israeli-annexed part of the Golan Heights.<sup>127</sup>

After negotiations between Russia and the rebels about the surrender of heavy weapons, the return of refugees and a local defence force came to nothing on 4 July 2018, Damascus and Moscow intensified their bombing: within 15 hours they had carried out 600 strikes from the air.<sup>128</sup> Within 24 hours after the resumption of bombing, the rebels returned to the negotiating table.<sup>129</sup> Following a series of local reconciliation agreements, pro-government forces recaptured the eastern part of the province of Dara'a on 6 July 2018 and the adjacent border area on 9 July 2018, including the border crossing at Nasib and Tal Sihab.<sup>130</sup> In exchange for the surrender of their heavy weapons, the armed opposition leaders and their men were evacuated to the province of Idlib.<sup>131</sup> After fierce fighting on 12 July 2018, the city of Dara'a also fell into the hands of government forces. The insurgents had already ceased their armed resistance by that time and agreed to give up their heavy weapons.<sup>132</sup> However, rebel leaders who stayed behind were allowed to keep their light weapons and to undergo a security procedure which regularised their status and allowed them to be removed from the lists of the security services.<sup>133</sup> Russia undertook to guarantee these reconciliation agreements by deploying its military police in these areas, and did so. At first, the reconciliation agreements seemed to be successful. People displaced as a result of the fighting came back and many insurgents joined the fifth Syrian army corps to fight ISIS.<sup>134</sup> However, after the Syrian government's return, the security forces arrested hundreds of rebels with regularised status and civilians who had been involved in unarmed opposition activities, although the Russian presence led to some restraint on the part of the security services.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Most of them slept out in the open. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Russia will crush southern Syrian rebels' hopes*, 5 July 2018; RFE/RL, *Syrian Rebels Return To Talks Over Pullout After Fierce Bombing Campaign*, 6 July 2018.

<sup>129</sup> Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.; RFE/RL, *Syrian Rebels Return To Talks Over Pullout After Fierce Bombing Campaign*, 6 July 2018.

<sup>130</sup> RFE/RL, *Russia-Backed Syrian Forces Take Key Border Site After Deal With Rebels*, 6 July 2018; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/border-opportunities-reviving-jordan-syria-free-trade-zone>; Ocha, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 2*, 12 July 2018.

<sup>131</sup> After Russian mediation, the rebels were reportedly given the choice either to accept an amnesty and stay in Dara'a or be escorted to the more northerly province of Idlib, which was still in the hands of rebels. The opposition there is led by fundamentalist fighters, whereas many fighters from Dara'a belong to the more moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA). Oxford Analytica, *Israel and Jordan have interests in Syria settlement*, 9 July 2018; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>

<sup>132</sup> On 15 July 2018, 500 rebels were transported by bus from the city of Dara'a to the northern province of Idlib. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>.

<sup>133</sup> The military intelligence service (MIS) opened a mobile post for three days in villages in the province of Dara'a. Citizens who had previously demonstrated a lack of loyalty to the Syrian authorities by participating in demonstrations, avoiding military service, deserting or joining a rebel group were given the opportunity to regularise their status. To do this, they had to provide a passport photo and an identity card. A security officer asked questions about their activities and contacts with the rebels and then completed a form in 12 copies. The applicant then had to sign a statement stating that he or she solemnly promised not to engage in any activities against the security of the Syrian State. After a period of five to ten days, the applicant could then collect a statement signed by the head of the MIS, stating that the name of the person concerned had been removed from the official investigation list and that he or she was allowed to pass unhindered through checkpoints. European University Institute, *The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations*, January 2019; ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>134</sup> According to the SOHR, pro-Assad troops, including 'reconciled rebels', carried out summary executions among surviving ISIS fighters. A former rebel stated that there was nothing left to do but fight; he had been discarded by the Americans and Jordanians and was willing to join pro-Assad forces to protect himself and his family and to be able to afford bread for his children. SOHR, *Mass executions carried out by the regime forces and the 'reconciliation factions' in Yarmouk basin*, 31 August 2018; ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Otherwise, many more arrests would have taken place. ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

After the Syrian authorities virtually had control of the province of Dara'a, on 15 July 2018, the Syrian army recaptured the village of Mashara with the help of air strikes, a first step in an offensive to retake the province of Quneitra.<sup>136</sup> Between 17 and 19 July 2018, the ground forces and air force bombarded the towns of Tassil, Nawa and Ash Shaykh Sa'd in western Dara'a and Nabe'a Al Sakher in the province of Quneitra.<sup>137</sup> On 17 July 2018, a bombardment on a school in Ein Eltineh, south of the city of Quneitra, which was being used as a temporary refuge for displaced persons, killed 13 people and injured at least 30.<sup>138</sup>

By 19 July 2018, pro-government troops had retaken the whole of eastern Dara'a and most of the Jordanian border area.<sup>139</sup> Between 21 and 23 July 2018 areas under the control of *Jaysh Khalid bin al-Waleed*<sup>140</sup> (JKBW) in the Yarmouk Basin suffered heavy bombing, including al-Shajra, Hayt, Tasil, Jellin, Sahm al-Golan, Adwan and Tal al-Jumou'. At least 32 civilians are said to have been killed.<sup>141</sup> By 26 July 2018, only a small strip of land on the Golan Heights was under the control of armed opposition groups, while an area of two hundred square kilometres was still under the control of JKBW, which has links with ISIS.<sup>142</sup> On 31 July 2018, the Syrian authorities claimed to have complete control over the Yarmouk Basin in the south, after defeating ISIS in that area.<sup>143</sup>

In de-escalation zone 4 in the south, which was completely recaptured by the Syrian authorities in July 2018, many 'irreconcilables' – individuals regarded as a threat by the Syrian government's 'reconciliation committees' – were allegedly tortured and killed. Most of these were members of the *Free Syrian Police* (FSP) and commanders of rebel groups.<sup>144</sup> In addition, reconciliation agreements were violated by the Syrian government, including by imposing enforced military service and carrying out arbitrary arrests. Small-scale demonstrations were organised in Dara'a in protest at reprisals by the Syrian government.<sup>145</sup>

From August 2018, there was no further serious fighting in the province of Dara'a. However, occasional attacks were committed. For example, on 10 January 2019 the '*Popular Resistance*'<sup>146</sup>, an opposition group in southern Syria, attacked the *Syrian Arab Army* (SAA) headquarters and the air force intelligence service in the city of Dara'a.<sup>147</sup> The '*Popular Resistance*' also attacked barracks in the town of Tafas in the west of the province of Dara'a on 10 January 2019.<sup>148</sup> On 10 March 2019, hundreds

<sup>136</sup> Baresh, Manhal. The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>137</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 3*, 19 July 2018.

<sup>138</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 3*, 19 July 2018.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Jaysh Khalid bin al-Waleed is a group which is said to have ties with ISIS. See also: ICG, *Middle East Report N°187 - Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 21 June 2018 and Jordani [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/entity/jaysh-khalid-ibn-al-waleed](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/jaysh-khalid-ibn-al-waleed).

<sup>141</sup> UN News, '*Warehouses emptying*' amid growing humanitarian needs in south-west Syria, 27 July 2018. OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 4*, 29 July 2018.

<sup>142</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 4*, 29 July 2018.

<sup>143</sup> A number of IS warriors were still fighting in the Al-Ragad valley at that time. Oxford Analytica, *Turkey faces multiple pressures in Syria's Idlib*, 1 August 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation in Dara'a, Qunaitra and As-Sweida Governorates- Situation Report No. 6*, 18 August 2018.

<sup>144</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syrian intelligence will play a major post-war role*, 14 December 2018. See also Aclad, *The Risks of Reconciliation: Civilians and Former Fighters face Continued Threats in Syria*, 25 January 2019.

<sup>145</sup> <https://www.scplatform.net/en/the-situation-in-daraa-after-the-government-of-syria-took-control-of-the-province-in-june-2018/>; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190131-syrians-protest-in-daraa-over-military-conscription/>.

<sup>146</sup> The *Popular Resistance* is a new opposition group established in response to the government's failure to adhere to the reconciliation agreements and the suppression of the population. Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>147</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: January 10-23*, 25 January 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

of Syrians in the city of Dara'a protested against the erection of a new statue of President Assad's late father.<sup>149</sup> On 29 April 2019, the Popular Resistance killed a former FSA fighter in Muzayrib who had signed a reconciliation agreement with the government.<sup>150</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, according to the *Syrian Network for Human Rights* (SNHR), 559 civilian deaths occurred in the province of Dara'a. In June and July of that year the figures were 233<sup>151</sup> and 177<sup>152</sup> respectively. Forty civilian deaths occurred in the period from August to December 2018. In the period January to April 2019, 21 civilian deaths occurred.

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 17 civilian fatalities in the province of Quneitra, according to the SNHR. In July of that year there were ten deaths. In the period January to April 2019, four civilian deaths occurred.<sup>153</sup>

#### *Israel*

The restoration of Syrian government control along the entire ceasefire line of the Golan Heights seemed likely to lead to confrontation with Israel, given the involvement of pro-Iranian militia on the side of the Syrian forces. For example, some members of Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas<sup>154</sup> have been brought into the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division.<sup>155</sup> During the battle for the south, the number of Israeli air strikes on 'Iranian' targets in Syria increased rapidly, with seven separate attacks on targets from the front line to Deir al-Zor in the east and Aleppo in the north. The Israeli air force also shot down a Syrian aircraft on 24 July 2018; however, Russia intervened to calm tensions. Moscow supported the *UN Disengagement Observer Force* (UNDOF), which on 2 August 2018 carried out its first patrol on the east side of the Syrian-Israeli ceasefire line since 2012. Although Russia dismissed the Israeli demand for the departure of all Iranian troops from Syria as 'unrealistic', Moscow suggested on 1 August 2018 that it had brokered the withdrawal of Iranian fighters to at least 85 kilometres from the Golan ceasefire line.<sup>156</sup> Israel has tacitly consented to the new offensive at the border on the assumption that a Damascus victory would mean that there was no further pretext for the presence of pro-Iranian troops.<sup>157</sup>

#### *1.2.3 The province of Al-Suweida*

On 25 July 2018, ISIS carried out a suicide attack in the city of Suweida, killing more than 240 and injuring at least 170.<sup>158</sup> ISIS fighters also burst into homes in at least eight villages in eastern and north-eastern Al-Suweida, killing civilians in their

<sup>149</sup> Reuters, *New Assad statue triggers protest in cradle of Syrian revolt*, 10 March 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>151</sup> The *Violations Documentation Center* in Syria reported fewer than 70 deaths in Dara'a in July. VDC, *Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria*, July 2018.

<sup>152</sup> The VDC reported 131 deaths in Dara'a in June. VDC, *Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria*, June 2018.

<sup>153</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>154</sup> Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas is a brigade in which Iraqi Shiite volunteers are active; the unit is said to have links with Hezbollah and with Iran. See e.g. <http://trendsintitution.org/liwa-abu-fadl-abbas-the-al-abbas-brigade-in-syria/>.

<sup>155</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Israel and Jordan have interests in Syria settlement*, 9 July 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Iran's Syria presence will resist US-Israeli pressure*, 11 July 2018.

<sup>158</sup> UN News, *UN chief strongly condemns terrorist attacks in south-west Syria*, 26 July 2018. OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 4*, 29 July 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Qunaitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 5*, 3 August 2018.

homes and abducting women and children.<sup>159</sup> According to unconfirmed reports, on 1 August 2018 about 80 ISIS fighters from the Hawd Al-Yarmouk area and about 300 ISIS fighters from the Al-Ragad valley south of Quneitra were transferred by the Syrian army with the help of the Russians to Al-Badia, the desert region east of Al-Suweida.<sup>160</sup>

Pro-government forces began a military campaign in Al-Badia against ISIS, which controlled parts of the desert area. From 12 August 2018, pro-government forces recaptured a large part of Al-Badia and the entire administrative border with the province of Al-Suweida.<sup>161</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 75 civilian fatalities in the province of Al-Suweida, according to the SNHR. According to the SNHR, 62 civilian deaths occurred in July of that year, but this low number probably fails to take account of the civilian deaths that occurred in the ISIS attack on 25 July 2018. In the period January to April 2019, no civilian deaths occurred.<sup>162</sup>

#### *1.2.4 The province of Tartous*

Since the start of the civil war in 2011, the province of Tartous has largely been in the hands of the Syrian government. No major attacks have occurred.<sup>163</sup> From January 2018 to December 2018, there were no civilian fatalities in the province of Tartous, according to the SNHR. In the period January to April 2019, there were likewise no civilian deaths.<sup>164</sup>

#### *1.2.5 The province of Latakia*

Since the start of the civil war in 2011, the province of Latakia has largely been in the hands of the Syrian government. No major attacks have occurred.<sup>165</sup> Only in the north-east of the province along the border with the province of Idlib were armed groups still active during the reporting period, including from the Turkmen population group.<sup>166</sup> Pro-Assad troops were transferred from southern Syria to the north of Hama and Latakia between 21 and 27 August 2018.<sup>167</sup> In addition, Liwa al-Quds, Liwa Imam Hussein and other pro-Assad troops were transferred from Damascus to areas along the border with Idlib.<sup>168</sup> On 22 January 2019, unknown militants committed a bomb attack in the city of Latakia, killing one person and injuring ten.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>159</sup> UN News, *UN human rights body strongly condemns recent 'shocking attacks' against civilians in south-west Syria*, 31 July 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 4*, 29 July 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Qunaitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 5*, 3 August 2018.

<sup>160</sup> Chatham House, *The Syrian Regime Is Using ISIS to Punish Civilians*, 30 July 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Qunaitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 5*, 3 August 2018.

<sup>161</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation in Dara'a, Qunaitra and As-Sweida Governorates- Situation Report No. 6*, 18 August 2018. See also The Defense Post, *ISIS steps up attacks on pro-Assad troops in Syria's Badia desert*, 23 April 2019.

<sup>162</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>163</sup> Intlsosandcontrolrisks, *Notice - Syria*, 27 January 2019.

<sup>164</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>165</sup> Intlsosandcontrolrisks, *Notice - Syria*, 27 January 2019.

<sup>166</sup> WHO, *Health Cluster Weekly Situation Report: Whole of Syria, Week 31*, 3 August 2018. See Bellingcat, *Syrian Turkmen Groups in Latakia: An Overview*, 7 February 2019.

and Reuters, *Rebels say Syrian army fails to retake Latakia mountain*, 19 May 2019.

<sup>167</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*.

<sup>168</sup> In many cases, these are Palestinians and Shiite Iraqis who are fighting on the side of the Assad regime. It is clear that these groups have ties (close ties in some cases) with and receive support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. See for example Syria Comment, *Overview of some pro-Assad Militias*, 1 September 2015; Bellingcat, *Assad Regime Militias and Shi'ite Jihadis in the Syrian Civil War*, 30 November 2016; ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*.

<sup>169</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: January 10-23*, 25 January 2019.

### *Israeli bombardments*

On 18 September 2018, the shooting down of a Russian reconnaissance aircraft by Syrian anti-aircraft guns led to tensions between Russia and Israel. According to Moscow, Israeli F-16s were carrying out attacks on targets in the province of Latakia at the same time. Their main target may have been an Iranian ammunition depot.<sup>170</sup> As a result, a summit meeting took place between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin on 19 February 2019.<sup>171</sup>

On 7 May 2019, the NLF killed eight Syrian soldiers in an ambush in Jabal al-Akrad.<sup>172</sup> After HTS carried out drone attacks on the Russian army base in Hmeimim at the end of April 2019, during which bombs were also dropped on the town of Jableh, the Fourth Division of the Syrian army attacked HTS positions on Mount Kabani, near the border with the province of Idlib.<sup>173</sup>

### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 31 civilian fatalities in the province of Latakia, according to the SNHR. In August of that year there were 13 deaths. In the period January to April 2019, four civilian deaths occurred.<sup>174</sup>

## 1.2.6 *The province of Idlib*

In an offensive in January and early February 2018, Syrian government forces had recaptured the south-eastern, sparsely populated part of the north-western province of Idlib from various armed opposition groups. Turkish observation posts were set up just across the border with the opposition area in the province of Idlib, under the terms of the agreement about the de-escalation zones.<sup>175</sup> Most of Idlib province, including the provincial capital of the same name, was held by various opposition groups during and at the end of the reporting period. This was also true of the border area with Latakia.<sup>176</sup>

### *Armed opposition*

In Idlib, the *National Liberation Front* (NLF) and *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) are the largest armed opposition movements. The NLF, led by Fadlallah al-Hajji, is the most important Turkish-backed opposition movement. The NLF brings together various armed groups supported by Turkey, such as Ahrar al-Sham, the Nouredine al-Zenki Brigades, Failaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Ahrar and other FSA groups such as *Victory Army* and the *Second Coastal Division*. The NLF is held together by Turkish funding and common enemies: the al-Assad regime, groups of Syrian Kurds and jihadists.<sup>177</sup>

The main rival of the NLF is HTS, which controlled the capital of the province, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey and other important areas in Idlib. HTS gained the upper hand in Idlib during the reporting period.<sup>178</sup> It is an umbrella organisation of various Islamist groups, but is generally regarded as the successor

<sup>170</sup> Haaretz.com, 'Israel Launches Series of Strikes on Targets Near Syria's Latakia', 18 September 2018. Oxford Analytica, *Plane downing will test Russia's warm ties with Israel*, 18 September 2018. Averbukh, L., & Klein, M. (2018). *Russia-Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict: political interests overshadow social and economic ties*.

<sup>171</sup> Simons, Greg. "Russia's Policy in Syria and the Middle East: Determination, Delight, and Disappointment: Russia in the Middle East:(Re) Emergence of a New Geopolitical Shatter Belt?." (2019).

<sup>172</sup> Confidential source, 9 May 2019.

<sup>173</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, *Airstrike Hits Largest Russian Base in Syria*, 29 April 2019; Al Masdarnews, *Syrian Army attacks jihadist stronghold with new missile system (video)*, 7 May 2019.

<sup>174</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>175</sup> Institute for the Study of War (ISW), *Syria situation report, 10 -24 January 2018*; Syria: direct, *Thousands of residents return to east Idlib countryside after government offensive ends*, 20 February 2018.

<sup>176</sup> See 1.2.4 in this report.

<sup>177</sup> IRIN, *Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions*, 3 September 2018.

<sup>178</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Pressure in Syria and Yemen will deepen jihadist split*, 10 August 2018; Atlantic Council, *Consequences of the HTS Take-Over in Northwest Syria*, 30 January 2019.



to Jabhat al-Nusra, the former branch of Al Qaeda in Syria.<sup>179</sup> HTS broke ties with Al Qaeda in 2016, but Russia, Turkey, the Netherlands and the European Union regard it as a terrorist organisation. It has ten to thirty thousand men in Idlib, depending on the source.<sup>180</sup> Led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, it has an opaque relationship with Turkey. Al-Julani seems to be pragmatic in his dealings with the Turkish intelligence service, but refuses to submit to orders from Ankara. He is also under pressure from more radical members who portray him as a tool of Turkey. Some critics of al-Julani, many of whom are Jordanians and Palestinians, have united in an al-Qaeda splinter faction known as Hurras al-Din (HAD).<sup>181</sup> In 2018, HTS conducted a military campaign in Idlib against ISIS extremists and potential 'traitors' who were seeking reconciliation with Damascus. HTS accused the small ISIS group in Idlib of sabotage and murders.<sup>182</sup>

### *Small factions*

Several smaller rebel factions in Idlib contribute to the complexity of the security situation. On the jihadist side, alongside Hurras al-Din, there are various foreign-led small factions that are close to HTS, including the Chechens of Junoud al-Sham. ISIS still has underground cells in the area, which both NLF and HTS are hunting down. In the west of the province of Idlib, the town of Jisr al-Shughour has become a stronghold of the *Turkestan Islamic Party* (TIP), a group of Uyghur jihadists. TIP has worked closely with Syrian jihadist factions in the past. In the spring of 2018, the TIP revised its policy of neutrality and helped HTS repel a surprise attack by opposition groups supported by Turkey.<sup>183</sup>

### *The purging of the rebels' ranks*

The Syrian authorities faced a lack of manpower in August 2018, numbers having been depleted by the fighting in the desert against ISIS.<sup>184</sup> They tried to use 'reconciled' rebels from Dara'a in the battle in Idlib, but reportedly only 1,500 fighters agreed. Attempts to promote 'reconciliation' in Idlib failed, after which large pro-opposition demonstrations were held. In their respective areas, the NLF and HTS arrested hundreds of alleged 'contacts' of Damascus, thus deterring others.<sup>185</sup> Between 27 July and 6 August 2018, HTS and the Ahrar al-Sham group arrested at least 80 people for alleged support for reconciliation with Damascus. Among the detainees were at least 70 members of the *Forces of Martyr Ahmed al-Abdu* – a member organisation of the FSA – who had been transferred from East Qalamoun to Idlib in April 2018 under the terms of an evacuation agreement.<sup>186</sup> Between 19 and 20 August 2018, HTS and the NLF arrested around 35 people for alleged support for reconciliation with Damascus. Most of the arrests were made in Maarat Misrin, to the north of the city of Idlib.<sup>187</sup> On 29 August 2018, HTS unveiled plans to form a 'popular resistance' force with rival groups in Idlib province to resist the expected Damascus offensive. However, HTS remained hostile to ISIS, and the hostility was mutual. Operations by ISIS cells also took place outside Idlib in the countryside west

<sup>179</sup> Hurras al-Din is now regarded as the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda.

<sup>180</sup> Marks, Jesse, and Hardin Lang. "Civilians Imperiled: Humanitarian Implications of US Policy Shifts In Syria." (2019). <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-offensive-view-damascus>

<sup>181</sup> IRIN, *Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions*, 3 September 2018. For relations between HTS and HAD see: Longwarjournal.org, *Al Qaeda-linked operations room counterattacks as bombs fall in northern Syria*, 6 May 2019.

<sup>182</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Pressure in Syria and Yemen will deepen jihadist split*, 10 August 2018.

<sup>183</sup> IRIN, *Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions*, 3 September 2018. For more information, see e.g. Jamestown.org, *The Turkistan Islamic Party in Double-Exile: Geographic and Organizational Divisions in Uighur Jihadism*, 7 September 2018.

<sup>184</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 6-16, 2018*.

<sup>187</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*.

of Aleppo. In July 2018, ISIS fighters who had infiltrated the HTS elite forces killed several HTS fighters.<sup>188</sup>

### *Ceasefire*

Since 2017 there has been a shaky – because regularly violated<sup>189</sup> – ceasefire between the Syrian authorities and some rebel groups in Idlib as a result of the peace talks between Turkey, Russia and Iran. However, many rebel groups, including HTS, were not party to this ceasefire. In 2018, Turkey tried to unite the more moderate rebels in a joint front against HTS and other radical groups.<sup>190</sup>

### *Offensive by government forces*

After defeating the rebels in the south, the pro-government forces prepared for an offensive against the insurgents in Idlib.<sup>191</sup> However, the military balance was not as favourable for pro-Assad troops in Idlib as in the other areas where the rebels' manpower, commitment and foreign support had dropped off sharply. In Idlib, the NLF had tens of thousands of combat-ready rebels. HTS and other Salafi jihadists had at least 10,000 fighters.<sup>192</sup> In retaliation for bombing, five attacks by HTS drones took place between 8 and 13 August 2018 on Bassel al-Assad airport near the city of Latakia. The drones were intercepted by the Russian air force.<sup>193</sup> On 12 August 2018, at least 67 people, including 17 children, were killed when an HTS arms depot exploded in Sarmada in Idlib province.<sup>194</sup> On 14 August 2018, the NLF used Grad rockets to attack a base of the *Tiger Forces*, an elite unit of the Syrian army, in West Hama.<sup>195</sup> On 14 August 2018, local media reported that large numbers of civilians from South Idlib had fled northwards towards Turkey following heavy bombing. Prior to the offensive, pro-government forces had distributed leaflets with warnings and closed off access to the area occupied by rebels. Turkey, which was in charge of monitoring the de-escalation zone, appealed to Russia to prevent a large-scale massacre.<sup>196</sup>

On 1 September 2018, the Russian Mediterranean Fleet began a large-scale exercise in which more than 25 warships and support vessels took part. Many of the ships were equipped with cruise missiles, which had already previously been used to bombard rebel positions in East Gouta.<sup>197</sup> Starting on 4 September 2018, Russia resumed air strikes on Idlib.<sup>198</sup> Russian aircraft carried out dozens of bombardments

<sup>188</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Middle East jihadist splits will widen despite defeats*, 31 August 2018.

<sup>189</sup> This includes the territorial gains made by the Syrian government in January and February 2018.

<sup>190</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-offensive-view-damascus>.

<sup>191</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Turkey faces multiple pressures in Syria's Idlib*, 1 August 2018.

<sup>192</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>193</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 6-16, 2018*; Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>194</sup> Two five-storey apartment buildings were destroyed when a munitions dump blew up in the town of Sarmada. According to the SOHR, the depot that exploded was in the basement of one of the buildings. UN, *Statement by Panos Moumtzis, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, on Civilian Casualties in Northwest Syria, Amman*, 14 August 2018.

<sup>195</sup> The rebels' fierce artillery fire gave the impression that Ankara was providing the NLF with heavy guns. ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 6-16, 2018*; Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018. For details, see: MEI, *The Tiger Forces*, October 2018.

<sup>196</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria's new Idlib offensive may be incremental*, 15 August 2018. For relations between Russia and Turkey, see ICG, *Europe Report N°250, Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, 28 June 2018.

<sup>197</sup> AD, *Syrië na de kruisraketten: hoe nu verder?*, 16 April 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Russia deploys navy to show and use power in Syria*, 3 September 2018.

<sup>198</sup> Turkey sent tanks and guns a day earlier to the border and into Syrian territory where Turkish military observation posts are located. Rebel fighters tried to obtain new recruits and destroyed bridges to defend the area. President Erdogan warned that an attack on the more than three million residents of Idlib could result in a massacre. Turkey also feared a mass influx of refugees. Oxford Analytica, *Syria's inevitable Idlib assault has major risks*, 4 September 2018; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/between-ankara-and-damascus-role-turkish-state-north-aleppo>; Oxford Analytica, *Turkey will rely on summit to avert Syrian catastrophe*, 5 September 2018; Oxford Analytica, *A Tehran deal on Syria will likely be unsustainable*, 7 September 2018.

of the west and south of Idlib province and the north of Hama province from 4 September 2018. Pro-government troops shelled towns and villages along the front line.<sup>199</sup>

Hospitals, schools and town halls were also hit during the shelling and bombing. In the sub-districts of Jisr al-Shughur and Mhambal in the west and south of the province of Idlib, people were killed and wounded.<sup>200</sup> Due to the lack of access and insecurity in the north-west, it was not possible to obtain a complete overview of all attacks and casualties. However, it was announced that between 4 and 9 September 2018, 33 people were killed and 67 were injured during shelling and bombing. On 4 September 2018, five people, including four children, were killed and twelve people, including six children, were injured in artillery shelling in the rebel-occupied city of Jisr al-Shughur.

On 7 September 2018, nine people, including five women and three children, were killed and 22 people were injured in artillery shelling of the government-held city of Muhradah.<sup>201</sup> On 6 September 2018, an NGO-supported hospital in the town of Kafar Zita in the north of Hama province was hit by a bombing raid.<sup>202</sup> During a bombardment of Khan Sheikhoun, an ambulance centre was badly damaged.<sup>203</sup> On 10 September 2018, bombs hit a primary school and a secondary school in the Jarjanaz in the Khan Sheikhoun and Ma'arrat An Nu'man sub-districts of Idlib province. Seven children were injured.<sup>204</sup> Local rescue workers and the SOHR described these bombardments as 'the most intense' in weeks. From combat helicopters, barrels filled with explosives and scrap were thrown at hospitals and rescue workers' centres.<sup>205</sup>

#### *Expiry of deadline*

The Sochi Agreement was rumoured to have caused splits within HTS. The clerics gave priority to spreading the Salafi jihadist ideology, whereas military commanders put the organisation's survival first. The second wing prevailed, following the more opportunistic approach of leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani.<sup>206</sup> On 15 October 2018, the deadline for Salafi jihadists to withdraw from Idlib expired. However, according to observers, 70% of Idlib's territory was still occupied by these factions, including HTS, on that day. On 13 October 2018, rival groups, including the al-Qaeda proxy Hurras al-Din, fired on pro-government forces.<sup>207</sup> On 14 October 2018, HTS issued a statement in which it welcomed the ceasefire agreement, but at the same time promised to continue fighting against the government.<sup>208</sup>

#### *A continuing struggle*

After the Sochi Agreement, hostilities decreased sharply in October 2018. In some areas, displaced persons returned to their villages, although skirmishes continued

<sup>199</sup> Parliamentary Document 27 925 V, 19-04-2019; ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 28 – September 12, 2018*.

<sup>200</sup> Since 2015, the Russians have carried out many thousands of bombing flights from Al Khmeimim air base, with devastating consequences for both Assad's opponents and the Syrian civilian population. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-offensive-view-damascus>; Ocha, *Syria: Recent Developments in North-west Syria*, 12 September 2018.

<sup>201</sup> OCHA, *Syria: Recent Developments in North-west Syria*, 12 September 2018.

<sup>202</sup> On 8 September 2018, an NGO-supported hospital in the town of Hass in the south of Hama province was hit by a bombardment. OCHA, *Syria: Recent Developments in North-west Syria*, 12 September 2018.

<sup>203</sup> RFE/RL, *Russian, Syrian Aircraft Pound Opposition-Controlled Idlib Province*, 8 September 2018; ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 28 – September 12, 2018*; OCHA, *Syria: Recent Developments in North-west Syria*, 12 September 2018.

<sup>204</sup> OCHA, *Syria: Recent Developments in North-west Syria*, 12 September 2018.

<sup>205</sup> <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79267>; <https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/76999>.

<sup>206</sup> For details about al-Julani see page 26. Oxford Analytica, *Turkish push will stoke infighting in Syria's Idlib*, 27 September 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>207</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Russia and Turkey will temporise on Syria's Idlib deal*, 16 October 2018.

<sup>208</sup> RFE/RL, *Militants Fail To Leave Buffer Zone In Syria's Idlib Under Russia-Turkey Deal*, 16 October 2018.

along the front line and between armed groups.<sup>209</sup> However, on 23 October 2018, pro-Assad forces bombed areas within the buffer zone, while Turkish-backed groups and Salafi jihadist factions fired rockets the following day at the city of Aleppo, which is held by the Syrian government.<sup>210</sup> Under the agreements made with Russia in Sochi, Turkey was supposed to contain the jihadist group HTS, but in fact HTS strengthened its hold on the province by capturing dozens of villages from opposition groups supported by Turkey at the end of 2018.<sup>211</sup>

The bombing and shelling increased again in November 2018, including in the demilitarised zone.<sup>212</sup> In the southern part of the province of Idlib, mortar shelling by the Syrian army struck the towns of Jarjanaz, Big Khwein and Hbit.<sup>213</sup> In December 2018, the Russian representative monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire in the de-escalation zones recorded three incidents of gunfire in the de-escalation zones in Idlib, and the Turkish representative recorded two.<sup>214</sup>

The fight escalated further in December 2018. There were firefights between pro-government forces and armed groups along the demilitarised zone in the eastern part of Idlib province and the northern part of Hama province.<sup>215</sup> Attacks by the two sides – as well as between armed groups – caused countless deaths and injuries.<sup>216</sup> In the southern part of Idlib province, many towns were shelled by the Syrian army with the support of Russia, leaving tens of thousands displaced.<sup>217</sup>

The fighting continued in 2019, with even more serious escalations.<sup>218</sup> At the end of February 2019, militia members killed 20 Syrian soldiers.<sup>219</sup> On 4 March 2019, HTS killed at least 33 Syrian soldiers.<sup>220</sup> On 9 April 2019, militants disguised as farmers carried out a suicide attack on an army base in which three soldiers were killed.<sup>221</sup> On the same day, Russian combat aircraft bombed the province of Idlib, wounding several people.<sup>222</sup> Bombardments of towns in the south of Idlib province and the north of Hama province then increased, causing more than a hundred deaths. According to the UN, the ongoing attacks in May 2019 alone killed

<sup>209</sup> OCHA, *Turkey/Syria: Cross-Border Humanitarian Reach and Activities from Turkey - October 2018*, 31 October 2018; Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, October 2018*, 31 October 2018.

<sup>210</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syrian government may provoke Idlib escalation*, 26 October 2018.

<sup>211</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Ankara hopes its Syrian invasion may now go ahead*, 23 January 2019; <https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/76999>.

<sup>212</sup> UNICEF *Syria Crisis Situation Report - November 2018*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>213</sup> At least eight attacks on Jarjanaz took place in November and December 2018, injuring at least ten children. OCHA, *Turkey/Syria: Cross-Border Humanitarian Reach and Activities from Turkey - November 2018*, 30 November 2018; UNHCR, *Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey): Response Snapshot (as of 30 November 2018)*, 20 December 2018; Reach, *Southern Idlib & Northern Hama Rapid Needs Assessment*, December 2018; UNHCR, *Syria - IDP Situation Monitoring Initiative (ISMI): Monthly Overview of IDP Movements in Northern Syria, November 2018*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>214</sup> A total of 234 armed groups accepted the ceasefire. UNSC, *S/2018/1157*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>215</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements (December 2018)*, 21 January 2019.

<sup>216</sup> OHCHR, *Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>217</sup> The towns affected were Kafr Nobol, Jarjanaz, Al-Tah, Al-Tamana'a, Khan Shykhun, AlKharin, Al-Skeik, Um Jalal, Al-Farjeh, Big Khwein, Abu Omar and Al-Janoudiyeh. OCHA, *Turkey/Syria: Cross-Border Humanitarian Reach and Activities from Turkey - December 2018*, 13 February 2019.

<sup>218</sup> OHCHR, *Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>219</sup> Thousands were driven from their homes as a result. France24, *The flare-up, which also left some militants dead*, 26 February 2019.

<sup>220</sup> AFP, *Al-Qaida-linked jihadis kill at least 33 Assad regime ranks in Syria despite truce, monitor says*, 4 March 2019. See also Middle East Eye, *Why Russia, Turkey and Iran can't reach a breakthrough on Syria*, 3 March 2019.

<sup>221</sup> Reuters, *Suicide bombers attack Syrian army post, several dead: media*, 9 April 2019.

<sup>222</sup> Attacks on HTS were carried out in Jisr Beir al Ra'as, al Shariyeh, al Hawijeh, al Hawiz, al Janabereh, Kafr Zita, Abedin, Tal al Sakhar, al Ankavi, Jarjanaz, Kafr Noubel and Torombeh. HTS attacked the Syrian army in Shatheh, al Rasif, al Karim, al Aziziyeh and al Masi'af. The Syrian Observer, *Women and children were wounded when Russian rockets, fired from warships in the Mediterranean, hit targets in Idlib province reports Hurriya Press*, 9 April 2019. Confidential source, 10 April 2019.

more than 160 people and displaced more than 270,000.<sup>223</sup> Injured civilians had no access to medical facilities, as hospitals remained closed during the heavy bombing.<sup>224</sup> According to the rebels, the Syrian army and its Russian ally were attempting to gain control of the area's major motorways with their attack on Idlib province.<sup>225</sup>

Some incidents are listed below which occurred in or were initiated from Idlib province:

- On 18 February 2019, unidentified militants carried out a bomb attack on the city of Idlib, killing at least 17 people and injuring 70;<sup>226</sup>
- Between 18 and 20 January 2019, ISIS carried out a number of bomb attacks on HTS in the city of Idlib; On 18 January 2019, at least 11 people were killed in an attack;<sup>227</sup>
- On 29 January 2019, pro-government forces shelled a residential area and a market in Ma'arrat An Numan in south-eastern Idlib, killing eleven people and injuring nine;<sup>228</sup>
- On 11 February 2019, fighting took place between HTS and ISIS in al-Dana in northern Idlib, during which a girl was killed;<sup>229</sup>
- On 12 February 2019, pro-government forces shelled various districts in Ma'arrat An Numan in south-eastern Idlib. Eleven civilians were killed;<sup>230</sup>
- On 15 February 2019, pro-government forces shelled Khan Shaykun in southern Idlib, killing two and injuring nine, including women and children;<sup>231</sup>
- On 16 February 2019, five civilians were killed in shelling in Khan Shaykun;<sup>232</sup>
- On 18 February 2019, pro-government forces in the Qusour district of the city of Idlib set off bombs designed to kill and maim. Sixteen people were killed and more than seventy were injured.<sup>233</sup>
- On 1 March 2019, unknown militants carried out a suicide attack in a restaurant in Idlib. At least eight people were killed and twenty-two injured, including HTS fighters.<sup>234</sup>

<sup>223</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/assistant-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-deputy-emergency-5>; Syrian Observer, *186,000 People Displaced in 10 Weeks*, 19 April 2019; Middle East Institute, *Conflict is far from over in Syria*, 29 April 2019; Al Jazeera, *Idlib air raids kill several amid heaviest fighting in months*, 6 May 2019; Libération, *Une escalade dans le nord de la Syrie provoque un exode massif de population*, 6 May 2019; France24, *Fighting kills 43 in Syria's northwest: monitor*, 7 May 2019; SJAC, *The Astana Process Has Failed Idlib*, 9 May 2019.

<sup>224</sup> Middle East Eye, *Syrian war-wounded struggle for treatment amid hospital devastation*, 19 May 2019.

<sup>225</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-offensive-view-damascus>

<sup>226</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: February 7 - 20*, 22 February 2019.

<sup>227</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: January 10-23*, 25 January 2019.

<sup>228</sup> OHCHR, *Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Reuters, *Twin blasts in rebel-held Syrian city Idlib kill at least 15*, 18 February 2019; OHCHR, *Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>234</sup> Confidential source, 7 March 2019.

- On 7 May 2019, HTS killed more than 30 Syrian soldiers at the checkpoint in al-Shanabra;<sup>235</sup>
- On 8 May 2019, militants killed dozens of Syrian soldiers in a suicide attack in Kafr Nabuda;<sup>236</sup>
- On 28 May 2019, bombing by the Syrian government army, supported by Russia, resulted in at least 27 deaths in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo.<sup>237</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 1,128 civilian fatalities in the province of Idlib, according to the SNHR. The period from January to June 2018 saw 890 deaths, and the period from July to December 2018 saw 238. In the period January to April 2019, 321 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>238</sup>

#### 1.2.7

#### *The province of Homs*

The Syrian authorities retained control of Homs province during the reporting period. Armed groups from opposition enclaves in Homs were able to leave for Idlib province after negotiations with the Syrian government in mid-2018.<sup>239</sup> In the fighting preceding this, a son of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is said to have been among those killed.<sup>240</sup> In areas that the pro-government forces had recaptured in 2018, the authorities behaved arbitrarily and abused their power over civilians.<sup>241</sup> A number of security incidents occurred at the end of the reporting period. For example, on 17 April 2019, unknown militants killed 15 Syrian soldiers in an ambush in Suknah.<sup>242</sup> On 28 April 2019, they killed 11 soldiers in Suknah.<sup>243</sup>

The US announced in February 2018 that it was keeping its troops at the al-Tanf base near the border with Iraq, with a 55-kilometre security zone around it, due to the presence of Iranian Guards<sup>244</sup> at the T4 air force base near the city of Homs.<sup>245</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 324 civilian fatalities in the province of Homs, according to the SNHR. The period from January to June 2018 saw 103 deaths, and the period from July to December 2018 saw 221. In July and August 2018 the figures were 133 and 44 respectively. In the period January to April 2019, 47 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>246</sup>

<sup>235</sup> Confidential source, 9 May 2019.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> The targets of the attacks included a hospital and a busy shopping street. From 26 May 2019, attacks by Assad's army on the two provinces claimed at least 50 civilian lives. CNN, *For residents of Syria's last rebel-held province, no place is safe as military offensive ramps up*, 31 May 2019.

<sup>238</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>239</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-offensive-view-damascus>; <https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/76999>.

<sup>240</sup> In a press statement on 3 July 2018, ISIS reported that Hudhayfah al-Badri had been killed in an 'operation against Nussayriyyah (the Alawites) and the Russians at the Homs power plant'. RFE/RL, *Son Of IS Leader Baghdadi Reported Killed In Battle In Syria*, 4 July 2018.

<sup>241</sup> OHCHR, *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible*, 28 February 2019.

<sup>242</sup> Confidential source, 18 April 2019.

<sup>243</sup> Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>244</sup> Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

<sup>245</sup> On 8 July 2018, the Israeli air force bombed the T4 base. RFE/RL, *Syrian State Media Says Israel Attacks Air Base In Homs*, 8 July 2018; Confidential source, 28 February 2019.

<sup>246</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

### 1.2.8 *The province of Hama*

During the reporting period, most of the province of Hama was in the hands of the Syrian government. A small part of the north of Hama province was part of the north-western de-escalation zone, which was controlled by various opposition groups.<sup>247</sup>

Militias funded by the Syrian authorities regularly earned money from criminal activities and were a potential hotbed of armed and social unrest.<sup>248</sup>

#### *The armed struggle*

In the course of 2018, schools and clinics were shelled in Hama and children were killed or maimed.<sup>249</sup> On 14 August 2018, the NLF attacked a base of the SAA *Tiger Forces* in the western part of Hama province with Grad rockets.<sup>250</sup> The *Abu Amara Special Tasks Battalion* – an opposition group with ties to HTS and Ahrar al-Sham – announced that it had killed a member of the Syrian military intelligence service in West Hama.<sup>251</sup> Between 4 and 11 September 2018, Russian aircraft carried out dozens of bombardments of the west and south of Idlib province and the north of Hama province. The SAA shelled towns and villages along the front line.<sup>252</sup> On 6 September 2018, a hospital in Kafar Zita in northern Hama was bombed.<sup>253</sup>

After the Sochi Agreement of 17 September 2018, fighting in northern Hama also subsided initially.<sup>254</sup> However, it broke out again in November 2018. Pro-government troops carried out bombings and shelling in Hama, killing and wounding civilians.<sup>255</sup> Combat intensified in late 2018 and early 2019. As well as between pro-government forces and the opposition, there was also fighting between different armed opposition groups. HTS regularly used improvised explosive devices (IEDs).<sup>256</sup>

#### *Security incidents*

- In early January 2019, pro-government forces attacked positions on the outskirts of the city of Hama held by battalions of Jaysh al-Izza and Turkmen units, causing deaths and injuries.<sup>257</sup>

<sup>247</sup> The Israeli army bombed Iranian targets in the provinces of Hama and Tartus on 4 September 2018. ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*; ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 28 – September 12, 2018*.

<sup>248</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018. This is true to some extent in all areas under the control of the Syrian government. Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>249</sup> UN News, *The 'used and abused' children of Syria must learn what 'peace' really means*, Security Council hears, 27 July 2018.

<sup>250</sup> On the same day, the Russian military police in northern Hama allegedly tried to expel pro-government militias from their positions near Turkish observation posts in southern Idlib. ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 6-16, 2018*; ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*.

<sup>251</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*.

<sup>252</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 28 – September 12, 2018*.

<sup>253</sup> OCHA, *Syria: Recent Developments in North-west Syria*, 12 September 2018.

<sup>254</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syria's Idlib deal can withstand spoilers for now*, 8 October 2018.

<sup>255</sup> Reach, *Southern Idlib & Northern Hama Rapid Needs Assessment*, December 2018; UNICEF *Syria Crisis Situation Report - November 2018*, 30 November 2018; UNHCR, *Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey): Response Snapshot (as of 30 November 2018)*, 20 December 2018; UNSC, *S/2018/1104*, 11 December 2018; UNSC, *S/2018/1157*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>256</sup> UNSC, *S/2019/42*, 15 January 2019; OHCHR, *Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>257</sup> La Nouvelle Gazette, *L'armée effectue des opérations contre les terroristes des "Bataillons d'al-Izza" dans la banlieue de Hama*, 16 January 2019; La Nouvelle Gazette, *L'armée inflige de lourdes pertes aux terroristes dans la banlieue de Hama*, 15 February 2019. See also Southfront.org, *Syrian Army Strikes Jaysh Al-Izza Positions In Northern Hama*, 31 March 2019.

- On 18 and 21 January 2019, the Syrian army bombarded HTS positions in Kafr Zita and al-Ziyarah;<sup>258</sup>
- On 23 February 2019, Jaysh al-Izza fighters attacked a power plant in the city of Mahardah in north-western Hama;<sup>259</sup>
- On 24 February 2019, a landmine exploded near the town of Salamiyah when a minibus full of workers drove over it. Twenty people were killed;<sup>260</sup>
- On 26 February 2019, Jaysh al-Izza fighters fired rockets at Suqaylabiyeh, killing one person and injuring five;<sup>261</sup>
- On 26 February 2019, Jaysh al-Izza fighters fired rockets at electricity pylons and city districts in Maharhad. Five civilians were injured;<sup>262</sup>
- On 3 March 2019, the Ansar al-Tawhid faction carried out an attack on an army checkpoint near Massasneh. More than 20 soldiers were killed. In subsequent fighting, the army killed 25 Ansar al-Tawhid fighters;<sup>263</sup>
- On 24 April 2019, HTS killed 11 Syrian soldiers in an ambush near al-Hakoura;<sup>264</sup>
- On 27 April 2019, HTS killed 20 Syrian soldiers in an attack in Hawiz.<sup>265</sup>
- On 28 April 2019, HTS attacked an army checkpoint in Qalaat Al-Mudiq, killing 13 soldiers;<sup>266</sup>
- On 3 May 2019, an ally of HTS killed several Syrian soldiers in Qalaat al-Madiq;<sup>267</sup>
- On 7 May 2019, HTS killed more than 30 Syrian soldiers at the checkpoint in al-Shanabra;<sup>268</sup>
- On 8 May 2019, militants killed dozens of Syrian soldiers in a suicide attack in Kafr Nabuda.<sup>269</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 313 civilian fatalities in the province of Hama, according to the SNHR. The period from January to June 2018 saw 137 deaths, and the period from July to December 2018 saw 176. In June and July 2018 the figures were 53 and 88 respectively. In the period January to April 2019, 21 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>270</sup>

<sup>258</sup> Confidential source, 24 January 2019.

<sup>259</sup> Confidential source 28 February 2019.

<sup>260</sup> Part of the countryside near Hama was under ISIS control for a while, and fighters from the group laid many landmines there. These explosives remained behind when the terrorist organisation was expelled from the area by the SDF (the coalition of Kurdish fighters and Syrian Arab rebels) in the autumn of 2017. <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2019/24-february-24-workers-were-killed-by-a-landmine-explosion>.

<sup>261</sup> Confidential source, 28 February 2019.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Confidential source, 7 March 2019.

<sup>264</sup> Confidential source, 25 April 2019.

<sup>265</sup> Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Confidential source, 9 May 2019.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 9 May 2019.

<sup>270</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.



### 1.2.9 *The province of Aleppo*

The city of Aleppo – apart from the Sheikh Maqsoud district<sup>271</sup> – is under the control of the Syrian regime.<sup>272</sup> To the north of the city of Aleppo is a small enclave, known as the *Tel Refat triangle*, which is controlled by the SDF.<sup>273</sup> The west of Aleppo province is under the control of local opposition groups.<sup>274</sup> The north and east of Aleppo province are under Turkish control.<sup>275</sup>

#### *The city of Aleppo*

Before the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, Aleppo was the largest city in Syria in terms of population and an important trading centre. The east of the city has been controlled by a number of opposition forces since 2012, including *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham* (formerly known as *Jabhat al-Nusra*) and factions of the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA). Since July 2016, the Syrian army had besieged the eastern part of the city, after cutting off the last access road, Castello Road, together with the Kurdish YPG.<sup>276</sup> In September 2016, the Syrian authorities launched the decisive assault on East Aleppo, assisted by Russian air support and Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan militias. By the end of December 2016, the authorities had completely retaken the eastern part of Aleppo. The northern part of the city, including Sheikh Maqsoud, was under the control of the Kurdish YPG. At the end of February 2018, pro-government forces took partial control of the Kurdish part of Aleppo.<sup>277</sup>

The western part of the province of Aleppo, which borders the province of Idlib, is part of the north-western de-escalation zone and was held by various armed opposition groups at the start of the reporting period, some of which were united in the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) alliance.<sup>278</sup> During the battle for southern Syria in July 2018, the number of Israeli air strikes on 'Iranian' targets in Syria increased rapidly, with seven separate attacks on targets from the front line to Deir al-Zor in the east and Aleppo in the north.<sup>279</sup>

#### *Evacuation*

On 18 July 2018, about 70,000 civilians and pro-Assad fighters who were surrounded by rebels in the Shiite towns of al-Foua and Kefraya in Idlib province were evacuated to Aleppo province. The surrounded area had been under siege by HTS for years. Syrian President Assad promised to release hundreds of rebels in return.<sup>280</sup> On 16 September 2018 *Liwa Shuhada al-Qaryatayn*, an armed opposition group previously supported by the US, signed an agreement with Russia under which its members were transferred from the Rukban displaced persons' camp on the Jordanian-Syrian border to opposition-controlled areas in the north of Aleppo province. The agreement related to around 5,000 fighters and civilians.<sup>281</sup> For more information about the Rukban camp, see 1.6 and 4.1.

<sup>271</sup> The district of Sheikh Maqsoud is under SDF control.

<sup>272</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>273</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>274</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-forces-bolster-assad-in-aleppo>;

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/12/friend-or-foes-ypg-regime/>.

<sup>277</sup> <https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/76999>; UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2 February 2017; ISW, *Syria situation report*, 21 February – 6 March, 2018.

<sup>278</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Prospects for Syria in 2019*, 12 November 2018. See also the Dutch COI report on Syria of May 2018.

<sup>279</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018.

<sup>280</sup> Watkins, Jessica. "Satellite sectarianisation or plain old partisanship?: Inciting violence in the Arab mainstream media." (2019).

<sup>281</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: September 13 – September 26*, 2018. See also The Defense Post, *Former US-backed Syrian opposition group Liwa Shuhada al-Qaryatayn relocating to Aleppo province*, 17 September 2018.

On 9 and 10 September 2018, pro-government troops were deployed in the towns of Tel Rifaat and Deir Jamal, north of the city of Aleppo.<sup>282</sup> On 14 September 2018, the Turkish intelligence service (MIT) and the Turkish gendarmerie arrested nine alleged members of YPG near the city of Afrin in the western part of the province of Aleppo. The detainees, who were transferred to southern Turkey, had reportedly killed two Turkish soldiers during Operation Olive Branch in January 2018.<sup>283</sup>

#### *Bombing and shelling*

On 25 October 2018, the SOHR reported the most intense bombardments since the establishment of a demilitarised zone on 17 September 2018. On 23 October 2018, pro-Assad forces bombed areas within the buffer zone, while Turkish-backed opposition groups and Salafi jihadist factions fired rockets the following day at the city of Aleppo, held by the Syrian government.<sup>284</sup> On 27 and 28 March 2019, the Israeli air force bombed the Sheikh Najjar industrial area and the Nairab military airfield in north-eastern Aleppo. Several people were killed.<sup>285</sup> HTS carried out missile and drone attacks on Syrian army targets. On 8 March 2019, for example, HTS fired rockets at Nairab airfield. Two civilians were killed and eight were injured.<sup>286</sup> On 20 April 2019, HTS shelled army positions in Aleppo city. At least 12 Syrian soldiers died in the attack.<sup>287</sup> On 27 April 2019, HTS allies killed 20 Syrian soldiers in Haresah.<sup>288</sup>

#### *Poison gas attack*

On 24 November 2018, 107 people, including children, were injured in a gas attack launched from Idlib. The victims were admitted to hospitals with respiratory problems. The SOHR also reported the shelling of city districts that caused suffocation symptoms among residents. According to the Syrian state media company SANA, rebels in three city districts had fired projectiles with gas. In a retaliatory action, Russia bombed the rebel area west of Aleppo.<sup>289</sup> The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) declared its readiness to investigate the possible poison gas attack in Aleppo. Rebel groups denied having used chemical weapons, claiming that the Syrian government was trying to undermine the ceasefire that had been concluded in September.<sup>290</sup> Russia sent military experts in the field of chemical warfare to the area.<sup>291</sup> The United States claimed that Russia and Syria had staged a poison gas attack on the Syrian city of Aleppo. According to the US, pro-government forces used tear gas against civilians in the northern Syrian city.<sup>292</sup>

#### *Afrin*

The Kurdish *Afrin Liberation Forces* (ALF) conducted operations in January 2019 against Turkish-backed militias in the Afrin district, which was captured by the Turkish army and Syrian armed groups in March 2018.<sup>293</sup> Kurdish troops gave

<sup>282</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 28 – September 12, 2018*.

<sup>283</sup> During Operation Olive Branch, Turkish troops and their FSA allies penetrated the then-Kurdish district of Afrin. ISW, *Syria Situation Report: September 13 – September 26, 2018*.

<sup>284</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Syrian government may provoke Idlib escalation*, 26 October 2018.

<sup>285</sup> Confidential source, 3 March 2019.

<sup>286</sup> Confidential source, 14 March 2019.

<sup>287</sup> Confidential source, 25 April 2019.

<sup>288</sup> Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>289</sup> Chapman, Geoffrey, Hassan Elbahtimy, and Susan B. Martin. "The Future of Chemical Weapons: Implications from the Syrian Civil War." *Security Studies* 27.4 (2018): 704-733.; UNSC, *S/2018/1104*, 11 December 2018.

<sup>290</sup> <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2019/01/opcw-spokespersons-statement-allegation-chemical-weapons-use-aleppo-syria>; UNSC, *S/2018/1104*, 11 December 2018.

<sup>291</sup> RFE/RL, *Russia Sends Experts To Aleppo After Reports Of Chemical Attack*, 25 November 2018.

<sup>292</sup> Chapman, Geoffrey, Hassan Elbahtimy, and Susan B. Martin. "The Future of Chemical Weapons: Implications from the Syrian Civil War." *Security Studies* 27.4 (2018): 704-733. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76106>

<sup>293</sup> Confidential source, 24 January 2019. See also Bellingcat, *Wrath of the Olives: Tracking the Afrin Insurgency Through Social Media*, 1 March 2019.

assurances that they would liberate occupied Afrin from Turkish and jihadist groups once ISIS had been defeated.<sup>294</sup>

### *Security incidents*

- On 24 October 2018, pro-government forces shelled the locality of Kafr Hamra in western Aleppo, which was occupied by the opposition. A girl was killed and three people were wounded;<sup>295</sup>
- On 7 November 2018, an IED was detonated in the opposition-held Bulbul district of Afrin, killing six civilians, including two girls;<sup>296</sup>
- On 12 November 2018, an IED was detonated at Ahmad Salim Malla primary school in Jarabulus. The school building was partially damaged;<sup>297</sup>
- On 19 November 2018, an IED was detonated in a rubbish bin near a school on the outskirts of Darat Izzah. Five boys were injured, and the school was badly damaged and closed;<sup>298</sup>
- On 24 November 2018, a bomb exploded in Tall al-Hawa in opposition-occupied territory in the eastern part of Aleppo province, killing five children;<sup>299</sup>
- On 18 January 2019, the ALF killed two Turkish soldiers and five Ahrar al-Sham fighters in Jindiras in the Afrin district;<sup>300</sup>
- On 18 January 2019, the ALF killed four al-Rahman fighters in the Afrin district;<sup>301</sup>
- On 22 January 2019, pro-government forces killed 11 HTS fighters in an attack in Tal Mamu;<sup>302</sup>
- On 12 February 2019, a car bomb was detonated at the Bab al-Salama checkpoint near the Turkish-Syrian border, injuring three police officers and four civilians;<sup>303</sup>
- On 21 February 2019, a car bomb attack was carried out on the Turkish-supported Free Syrian Army in Afrin. Two people were killed and twenty were injured in the attack;<sup>304</sup>
- On 21 February 2019, a bomb attack was carried out in Jarabulus on a YPG ammunition depot. Five YPG fighters died in the attack;<sup>305</sup>
- On 21 February 2019, Ansar al-Tawheed fighters fired rockets at SAA positions in al-Zahra;<sup>306</sup>
- On 22 February 2019, pro-government troops shelled HTS positions in Yaqid al-Adas in western Aleppo;<sup>307</sup>
- On 22 February 2019, HTS fighters fired rockets at SAA positions in Basju Mallah;<sup>308</sup>

<sup>294</sup> Schmidinger, Thomas, and Andrej Grubacic. *Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava*. PM Press, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75419>. Parliamentary Document 32 623 Nr. 259, 21-05-2019.

<sup>295</sup> UNSC, S/2018/1104, 11 December 2018.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Confidential source, 24 January 2019.

<sup>301</sup> Confidential source, 24 January 2019.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Haaretz.com, *Car Bomb Explodes Near Syrian Town on Border With Turkey*, 12 February 2019.

<sup>304</sup> Confidential source, 28 February 2019.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

- On 25 February 2018, Tanzim Hurras al-Din fighters stormed Syrian army positions at Ruwaydah in southern Aleppo. The fighters claimed to have killed several soldiers, although this was denied by the army;<sup>309</sup>
- On 26 February 2019, the ALF killed the commander of the Sultan Murad Brigade in Afrin;<sup>310</sup>
- On 2 March 2019, the ALF in Deir Mushmush attacked FSA positions and killed several FSA fighters;<sup>311</sup>
- On 3 March 2019, the YPG killed eight Turkish soldiers and FSA fighters in Afrin;<sup>312</sup>
- On 5 March 2019, the Kurdish '*Wrath of Olives*' killed five FSA fighters in Al-Bab;<sup>313</sup>
- On 17 April 2019, the ALF killed six soldiers of the Turkish army and its allies in Afrin;<sup>314</sup>
- On 28 April 2019, the ALF killed two Turkish soldiers in Azaz;<sup>315</sup>
- On 4 May 2019, the ALF in Malikiya repelled an attack by the Turkish army and subsequently killed 40 Turkish soldiers and fighters from opposition groups supported by Turkey.<sup>316</sup>

#### *Manbij*

At the end of December 2018, the *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF), of which the *Kurdish People's Protection Units* (YPG units) are the most important part, still held much of north-eastern Syria.<sup>317</sup> In 2016, the SDF had captured the city of Manbij from ISIS. After US President Trump promised on 19 December 2018 to withdraw all US troops from Syria, Turkey sent reinforcements to the Syrian border, including troops and tanks. Turkish-supported militias were deployed in areas around the town of Manbij.<sup>318</sup> On 28 December 2018, President Assad's troops gathered in the immediate vicinity of Manbij, where American and French troops were still stationed at that time. The Syrian army had been invited to do so by the YPG, which feared a Turkish invasion of Manbij. The Syrian army promised 'complete security for all Syrian citizens and others in the region'. Turkey condemned the presence of the Syrian army at Manbij, while Russia called the development a 'positive step' to 'stabilise' the situation.<sup>319</sup>

In early June 2018, the US and Turkey agreed on a plan for Manbij. Among other things, it was settled that the YPG would withdraw from the city and that the US and Turkey would conduct joint patrols to guarantee security in and around Manbij.<sup>320</sup>

On 16 January 2019, four Americans were killed in a suicide attack on a patrol of American and Kurdish soldiers in Manbij. The attack killed a total of 16 people;

<sup>309</sup> Panarmenian.net, *Foreign militants "attempt to ambush Syrian troops in Aleppo"*, 26 February 2019.

<sup>310</sup> Confidential source, 28 February 2019. See also Bellingcat, *Syrian Turkmen Groups in Latakia: An Overview*, 7 February 2019.

<sup>311</sup> Confidential source, 7 March 2019.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Confidential source, 25 April 2019.

<sup>315</sup> Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>316</sup> Confidential source, 9 May 2019.

<sup>317</sup> See also: The Defense Post, *Former US-backed Syrian opposition group Liwa Shuhada al-Qaryatayn relocating to Aleppo province*, 17 September 2018..

<sup>318</sup> RFE/RL, *Pentagon Withdrawal Order For U.S. Troops From Syria 'Signed'*, 24 December 2018; Oxford Analytica, *Trump leaves field to Putin and Erdogan in Syria*, 27 December 2018.

<sup>319</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Trump leaves field to Putin and Erdogan in Syria*, 27 December 2018; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/will-syrian-kurds-strike-deal-moscow>; RFE/RL, *Syrian Forces Enter Key Northern City, As Russia Hails Move*, 28 December 2018.

<sup>320</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/05/u-s-turkish-ties-may-be-cut-for-good-in-syria/>.

Kurdish soldiers are also said to have been killed. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. Near a restaurant used by the soldiers, a suicide bomber detonated his vest. Three American soldiers were wounded; it was unclear how many civilians were injured.<sup>321</sup> On 9 March 2019, three SDF fighters were killed in a bomb attack in Manbij.<sup>322</sup> On 12 April 2019, seven SDF fighters were killed in two bomb attacks in Manbij.<sup>323</sup> On 22 April 2019, ISIS fighters killed three SDF fighters in Manbij.<sup>324</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 608 civilian fatalities in the province of Aleppo, according to the SNHR. The period from January to June 2018 saw 416 deaths, and the period from July to December 2018 saw 192. In the period January to April 2019, 21 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>325</sup>

#### *1.2.10 The province of Hasaka*

The Kurdish PYD controls the province of Hasaka. Besides Kurds, there are also population groups such as Arabs and Assyrian Christians in this province.<sup>326</sup> At the end of June 2018, the SDF drove out the last remaining ISIS fighters from the province of Hasaka; they had been present in the area to the east of the city of Shaddadi.<sup>327</sup> No major security incidents are said to have occurred in Hasaka during the reporting period, with the exception of clashes between the YPG (the military wing of the PYD) and Syrian government forces at the Kurdish checkpoint in Qamishli on 8 September 2018. There were also attacks by ISIS members.<sup>328</sup> On 10 January 2019, the first American soldiers left the base at Al-Rmelan in the province of Hasaka.<sup>329</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From May 2018 to April 2018, there were 335 civilian fatalities in the province of Hasaka, according to the SNHR. The highest total of civilian deaths occurred in August 2018: 114. In the period January to April 2019, 47 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>330</sup>

#### *1.2.11 The province of Deir al-Zor*

From December 2017, the Syrian authorities were in control of the mainly Arab-populated city of Deir al-Zor in the oil-rich province of the same name. They had previously restored control over the part of the province of Deir al-Zor that lies to the south-west of the River Euphrates. ISIS fighters did still remain, however, especially in the rural areas and the desert. The SDF controlled the part of the province to the north-east of the river, apart from a desert area where ISIS fighters were located.<sup>331</sup>

The offensive against ISIS in Iraq and Syria began at the end of 2016. After a bloody battle, the jihadists were driven from their main strongholds, Mosul (July

<sup>321</sup> <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1733559/explosion-kills-four-in-manbij/>.

<sup>322</sup> Confidential source, 14 March 2019.

<sup>323</sup> Confidential source, 18 April 2019.

<sup>324</sup> Confidential source, 25 April 2019.

<sup>325</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>326</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/will-syrian-kurds-strike-deal-moscow>. Gunes, Cengiz. "Developments in the Kurdish Issue in Syria and Turkey in 2017." *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 16.1 (2019): 211-229. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78232>.

<sup>327</sup> Health Cluster, *Weekly Situation Report: Whole of Syria*, Week 26, 29 June 2018.

<sup>328</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 28 – September 12*, 2018.

<sup>329</sup> RFE/RL, *U.S.-Led Coalition Says Withdrawal 'Process' From Syria Has Begun*, 11 January 2019; <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/02/planning-for-failure-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-syria/>.

<sup>330</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>331</sup> See the Dutch COI report on Syria of June 2018.

2017) and Raqqa (October 2017). As a result, the territory that ISIS controlled shrank to a small area of about 30 square kilometres in the province of Deir al-Zor around the Syrian town of Hajin, near the border with Iraq. Unlike in Mosul and Raqqa, the ISIS fighters in and around Hajin had nowhere left to go.<sup>332</sup> On 22 June 2018, the Iraqi army bombed a building in the city of Hajin where a meeting of ISIS leaders was taking place at the time. Forty-five ISIS fighters died in the bombing.<sup>333</sup>

On 10 September 2018 the SDF, supported by air strikes by the US-led coalition, began a major offensive against ISIS in an attempt to eliminate the terror movement's last strongholds in eastern Syria. Thousands of ISIS fighters put up fierce resistance.<sup>334</sup> On 15 October 2018, the SOHR reported that ISIS fighters had stormed the Al-Bahra refugee camp. The camp is located in an area controlled by the SDF but close to the front line. After Kurdish fighters had fled, 130 families were abducted. The hostages were taken to the ISIS enclave of Hajin, on the east side of the Euphrates.<sup>335</sup>

On 25 October 2018, ISIS launched an attack on the SDF under the cover of a sandstorm; it also carried out a number of suicide attacks on SDF positions. On 28 October 2018, ISIS announced that it had recaptured the villages of al-Sousa, Baghouz and the surrounding villages near the border with Iraq from the SDF. ISIS deployed 200 combatants, including female snipers and children, in the fighting. According to the SOHR, 234 ISIS fighters and 188 SDF fighters were killed in fighting in October 2018. Other sources reported higher numbers of deaths on both sides.<sup>336</sup> On 9 November 2018, according to the SOHR, 17 children were killed in air strikes on ISIS targets.<sup>337</sup> The city of Hajin was bombed on 4 and 20 November 2018. On 12 November 2018, 60 people were killed or wounded during bombing of the village of Al Shafa.<sup>338</sup> In December 2018 and early 2019, the fighting decreased and civilians were given the opportunity to leave the last ISIS territory in Syria.<sup>339</sup> In February 2019 alone, around 50,000 people were evacuated from Baghouz, most of them women and children. In many cases, the evacuation was chaotic and people died en route from Baghouz to the Al Hol refugee camp in the Syrian-Kurdish region.<sup>340</sup> In February 2019, at least 16 civilians were killed in the bombing of one of the last ISIS strongholds. Among the victims were at least seven children. Nearly 30 ISIS fighters were also killed, including the French jihadist Fabien Clain, who claimed responsibility for the ISIS attacks in Paris in 2015.<sup>341</sup> On 18 February 2019, the

<sup>332</sup> Gunes, Cengiz. "Developments in the Kurdish Issue in Syria and Turkey in 2017." *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 16.1 (2019): 211-229.

<sup>333</sup> RFE/RL, *Iraq Says Dozens Of IS Militants Killed In Air Strike In Syria*, 23 June 2018.

<sup>334</sup> According to Russian President Putin, ISIS had taken 700 people hostage in eastern Syria, including several Europeans and Americans. At least ten hostages were said to have been executed. Oxford Analytica, *IS opportunism may delay defeat in eastern Syria*, 29 October 2018. See also Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, October 2018*, 31 October 2018.

<sup>335</sup> According to Russian President Putin, ISIS had taken 700 people hostage in eastern Syria, including several Europeans and Americans. At least ten hostages were said to have been executed. Oxford Analytica, *IS opportunism may delay defeat in eastern Syria*, 29 October 2018.

<sup>336</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=111892>. Oxford Analytica, *IS opportunism may delay defeat in eastern Syria*, 29 October 2018.

<sup>337</sup> Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2018*, 30 November 2018. OHCHR, *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible*, 28 February 2019.

<sup>338</sup> UNICEF *Syria Crisis Situation Report - November 2018*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>339</sup> OCHA, *Flash Update 2: Displacement from Hajin, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate*, 20 February 2019.

<sup>340</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=119893>. UNSC, *S/2019/157*, 19 February 2019. HRW, *Families of Iraqi IS Suspects Transferred from Syria*, 24 February 2019. RFE/RL, *U.S.-Backed Forces In Syria Advance On Last IS-Held Territory*, 2 March 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/trump-says-isis-defeated-reality-says-otherwise>.

<sup>341</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/trump-says-isis-defeated-reality-says-otherwise>.

Kurdish authorities stated that they will not release foreign ISIS fighters, but that the countries where these fighters come from are responsible for them.<sup>342</sup>

#### *Final offensive*

On 1 March 2019, a final offensive was launched by the SDF with air support from the anti-ISIS coalition. On 2 and 3 March 2019, 200 ISIS fighters surrendered and there were about 1,000 ISIS fighters left in Baghouz. This was reported by Reuters news agency on the basis of a spokesperson for the SDF. Three thousand civilians were also evacuated. The offensive was complicated by landmines, snipers, car bombs and suicide bombings. The final battle lasted longer than planned because the SDF was surprised by the large number of civilians that were still in the last ISIS enclave. On 4 March 2019, about 3,000 residents who were left behind were picked up from the area in trucks.

Mass graves containing beheaded Yazidi women were found in Baghouz.<sup>343</sup> The last ISIS bastion in Baghouz fell on 23 March.<sup>344</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 607 civilian fatalities in the province of Deir al-Zor, according to the SNHR. The period from January to June 2018 saw 353 deaths, and the period from July to December 2018 saw 254. In the period January to April 2019, 301 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>345</sup>

### 1.2.12

#### *The province of Raqqa*

Power has changed hands in Raqqa four times in the last seven years. First there was the Syrian government, then the Free Syrian Army (FSA), followed by Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda) and ISIS, and since October 2017 the SDF. Although this is a mixed Kurdish-Arab force, the Syrian Kurds of the YPG are in control of the SDF. This creates tensions. Members of the new government in Raqqa and elsewhere have been murdered by unknown assailants, perhaps in order to sabotage the cooperation between Arabs and Kurds. Some accuse the YPG of working with the same Sunni tribal leaders who collaborated with ISIS, and there are also allegations of corruption. Before the war, the Kurds formed a small minority of the population in this province.<sup>346</sup>

According to the American *Institute for the Study of War* (ISW), Kurdish Asayish security forces opened fire on residents of Raqqa on 19 August 2018 and arrested demonstrators who protested against SDF violence towards residents.<sup>347</sup>

On 23 August 2018, supporters of President Assad distributed pamphlets calling on citizens to oppose the SDF.<sup>348</sup>

On 7 January 2019, ISIS carried out a suicide attack on a building of the SDF municipal council in Raqqa, killing at least five people and injuring more than twenty. Critics of the withdrawal of US troops saw this as confirmation that ISIS had

<sup>342</sup> They announced this after President Trump had stated that these foreign fighters would be released unless Europe would take them back. Reuters, *U.S.-backed force won't release jihadists but says countries must take them back*, 18 February 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/unsustainability-isis-detentions-syria>.

<sup>343</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=119893>; <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Media-Library/News-Releases/Article/1794426/statement-from-maj-gen-christopher-ghika-on-the-end-of-daesh-held-territory/>.

<sup>344</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/trump-says-isis-defeated-reality-says-otherwise>.

<sup>345</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>. During this period, unknown militants carried out many attacks with explosives, killing both SDF soldiers and civilians. On 21 February 2019, for example, an IED was detonated in a bus at Al-Shheell in an oil-rich area. At least 20 people were killed and countless others were injured. Confidential source, 21 February 2019.

<sup>346</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/kurds-5/>.

<sup>347</sup> ISW, *Syria Situation Report: August 16-28, 2018*.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

not yet been defeated and continued to pose a threat.<sup>349</sup> For example, on 3 March 2019, ISIS killed two SDF fighters in Karama.<sup>350</sup> On 29 April 2019, several SDF fighters and civilians were killed by ISIS in a bomb attack in Raqqa City.<sup>351</sup>

#### *Civilian casualties*

From January 2018 to December 2018, there were 156 civilian fatalities in the province of Raqqa, according to the SNHR. The period from January to June 2018 saw 109 deaths, and the period from July to December 2018 saw 47. In the period January to April 2019, 51 civilian deaths occurred.<sup>352</sup>

### **1.3 Civilian casualties**

The United Nations stopped collecting data on civilian casualties in 2014 due to the lack of access to and reduced reliability of the required sources.<sup>353</sup> OCHA reports on civilian deaths during specific escalations of the struggle in Syria.<sup>354</sup>

Sources report in different ways on the number of human lives that the conflict in Syria has cost. Not all sources distinguish between the numbers of fighters killed and civilian deaths.

Several articles and reports have reported that the fighting in Syria since March 2011 has already cost the lives of more than 500,000 people. Other sources mention numbers of around 200,000 verified conflict-related deaths. These reports look at the total number of Syrian fighters and civilians killed without breaking down the numbers. The *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* (SOHR), an NGO operating from the United Kingdom, reports daily on the victims of the conflict. It reported in early December 2018 that in the course of over seven years, around 111,330 civilian deaths had occurred and that around 265,000 fighters<sup>355</sup> had died. They added that the actual number may be considerably higher than the number that the organisation has been able to document. According to the SOHR, 88,000 people had also died in government prisons. The *Syrian Network for Human Rights* (SNHR) reported more than 220,000 deaths from March 2011, but it only counted civilian deaths, whereas the SOHR also records the deaths of fighters, rebels and Syrian troops.<sup>356</sup>

Another NGO, the *Violations Documentation Center in Syria* (VDC), reports monthly on conflict-related fatalities, distinguishing between civilians and fighters, the parties responsible and the causes of death. According to the VDC, 191,219 people died in the conflict between March 2011 and December 2018: 123,279 civilians and 67,940 non-civilians.<sup>357</sup> Up to and including December 2017, these numbers were 183,218, 116,904 and 66,314 respectively.<sup>358</sup> Therefore, according to the VDC, 6,375 civilian

<sup>349</sup> Escaped ISIS fighters have gone into hiding and formed sleeping cells. They have the capacity to carry out attacks. Oxford Analytica, *Syria suicide attack will bolster critics of US policy*, 9 January 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>350</sup> Confidential source, 7 March 2019.

<sup>351</sup> Members of ISIS still live in Raqqa and the surrounding area. Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>352</sup> See <http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/report/monthly-reports/victims-death-toll/>.

<sup>353</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=108829>.

<sup>354</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/country/syr>.

<sup>355</sup> Soldiers, paramilitaries and rebels, including foreign fighters and ISIS fighters.

<sup>356</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=108829>; SOHR, *About 522 thousand people were killed in 90 months since the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011*, 13 September 2018; Human Rights Watch; *World Report – Syria*, 17 January 2019; SNHR, *223.161 civilians were killed from March 2011 to March 2019*, 13 March 2019.

<sup>357</sup> <https://vdc-sy.net/monthly-statistical-report-casualties-syria-december-2018/>.

<sup>358</sup> VDC, *Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria*, December 2017.



deaths occurred in 2018. The SNHR reports a similar number of civilian deaths over that period, namely 6,964.<sup>359</sup>

Based on the data from the SNHR, an average of 1,400 civilian deaths per month occurred in 2016, 850 per month in 2017 and 580 per month in 2018.<sup>360</sup>

Although the percentages vary, both organisations report that the vast majority of civilian deaths were caused by military violence, largely air strikes<sup>361</sup> by the Syrian authorities and their allies.<sup>362</sup> Even after the fighting has stopped in a city or area, civilian casualties continue to occur. For example, unexploded munitions or deliberately placed explosives (IEDs) have claimed many civilian casualties. In Raqqa in particular, this has caused many additional civilian casualties.<sup>363</sup>

Given the complex nature of the conflict and the lack of possibilities for documenting and verifying the victims in Syria, it is difficult for the various monitoring organisations to provide a reliable breakdown of the number of victims per province. Since October 2017, the SNHR has included a map in its monthly reports showing the number of civilian deaths per province. It also states by whom the civilians were killed, but no mention is made of the number of incidents that have led to the death toll in question. The following picture emerges based on the data from the SNHR.<sup>364</sup>

Number of civilian deaths												
	May 18	Jun 18	Jul 18	Aug 18	Sep 18	Oct 18	Nov 18	Dec 18	Jan 19	Feb 19	Mar 19	Apr 19
<b>Damascus (incl Rif Dimashq)</b>	42	41	210	43	16	7	8	10	10	11	2	6
<b>Idlib</b>	93	102	67	44	30	25	55	10	18	81	120	102
<b>Deir al-Zor</b>	41	46	56	20	43	34	74	27	83	51	107	60
<b>Aleppo</b>	35	24	34	68	24	28	18	20	40	21	35	33
<b>Dara'a</b>	30	233	177	12	11	6	7	4	5	4	2	10
<b>Hama</b>	28	53	88	22	31	5	19	11	11	48	18	56
<b>Homs</b>	20	10	133	44	6	10	18	9	12	14	11	10
<b>Hasaka</b>	51	53	35	114	17	7	7	4	10	4	24	9
<b>Raqqa</b>	10	15	8	6	13	11	5	4	6	8	15	32
<b>Quneitra</b>	4	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	3
<b>Al-Suweida</b>	-	4	62	5	-	1	3	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Lattakia</b>	-	4	6	13	1	2	1	2	1	-	-	3
<b>Tartous</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total/month</b>	354	593	886	391	192	167	231	108	197	242	334	324

#### *International coalition*

In February 2019, the US Defense Department released part of a secret report from April 2018 on civilian casualties in the fight against ISIS. The US had been criticised for its low estimates of civilian casualty numbers compared to those reported by

<sup>359</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2018/09/24/civilian-death-toll/>

<sup>360</sup> SNHR, *10,204 Civilians Killed in Syria in 2017*, 1 February 2018. SNHR, *Documenting the Death of 6,964 Civilians in Syria in 2018*, 1 February 2019.

<sup>361</sup> With fire bombs, barrel bombs and cluster munitions. Barrel bombs are oil barrels, water tanks or gas cylinders filled with explosives (TNT) and scrap metal; they are highly destructive and usually cause many casualties.

<sup>362</sup> Russia, Iran, the Lebanese organisation *Hezbollah* and Syrian and non-Syrian militia members.

<sup>363</sup> WHO, *Unexploded mines pose daily risk for people in northern Syria*, 6 March 2019.

<sup>364</sup> It should be pointed out that these figures have been distilled on the basis of a single source. It is unknown how realistic these figures are.

NGOs.<sup>365</sup> In October 2014, the Netherlands joined the international coalition against ISIS. In the first period, bombing only took place in Iraq. From February 2016, it also took place in eastern Syria. The bombing focused mainly on the caliphate's infrastructure (headquarters, supply lines, weapon and bomb factories, oil refineries), and involved an extremely careful targeting process.<sup>366</sup>

The deployment of Dutch F-16s in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria came to an end on 31 December 2018.<sup>367</sup> In September 2018, the coalition counted about a thousand civilian deaths since the start of the air war in September 2014, including four as a result of Dutch bombing. However, NGOs such as *Airwars* and Amnesty International estimate the number of civilian deaths as at least 6,500.<sup>368</sup> The differences in figures are partly due to differences in procedures.<sup>369</sup> For more details on civilian casualties caused by attacks by the international coalition, see the progress report of 18 April 2019 on the Dutch contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition and the broader security deployment in Iraq in 2019.<sup>370</sup>

## 1.4 Violence against specific groups

Civilians are the victims of careless use of weapons and are used by various parties to the conflict as a human shield or bargaining counter.<sup>371</sup>

Apart from ISIS, sources do not mention any other parties to the conflict that target particular groups on grounds of ethnicity, religion, profession or other characteristics for ideological motives. Enmity is based on opposing political affiliations and ideologies in which religion may play a role.<sup>372</sup>

Sources report that religious minorities such as Christians and Druze are treated fairly well by both the authorities and Islamic opposition groups. Their tolerance represents a political approach, based on the assumption that good treatment of minorities will reinforce the legitimacy of their administration. In northern Syria there are a number of Christian villages (Yakubia) and Druze villages, such as Kafr Kila in Idlib.<sup>373</sup> Christian women do not wear veils in Idlib.<sup>374</sup>

<sup>365</sup> SJAC, *US Military Report on Civilian Casualties Fails to Address Syrian Concerns*, 13 February 2019.

<sup>366</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-27925-629.html>.

<sup>367</sup> The coalition's precision bombing has not always succeeded in preventing civilian casualties. However, it is virtually impossible to find out when a Dutch F-16 has been responsible for civilian casualties.

<sup>368</sup> <https://airwars.org/>.

<sup>369</sup> The coalition estimates civilian casualties from the air: Dutch F-16s, for example, have cameras that can view the ground from a height of up to two kilometres. By contrast, NGOs rely on reports from the ground with the help of journalists, activists and surviving relatives.

<sup>370</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2019/04/18/kamerbrief-over-de-voortgang-van-de-nederlandse-bijdrage-aan-de-anti-isis-coalitie-en-de-brede-veiligheidsinzet-in-irak-in-2019/kamerbrief-over-de-voortgang-van-de-nederlandse-bijdrage-aan-de-anti-isis-coalitie-en-de-brede-veiligheidsinzet-in-irak-in-2019.pdf>.

<sup>371</sup> UNGA, *A/HRC/39/65*, 9 August 2018; UNGA, *A/HRC/40/70*, 31 January 2019; Human Rights Watch, *World Report Syria*, 17 February 2019.

<sup>372</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>373</sup> HTS uses its systematic practices of arbitrary arrest, torture and extortion mainly as retaliation against (alleged) political opponents, rather than targeting specific minorities. HTS does, however, officially reject democracy and secularism and impose strict application of Sharia law on civilians. In areas where HTS has control over educational provision, women and children from the age of 9 are obliged to cover their bodies and hair. Disobedience would, among other things, be punished with violence or temporary suspension. Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyrria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx>.

<sup>374</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

In southern Syria, ISIS reportedly attacked Druze villages with the support of the Syrian authorities. Many people were killed.<sup>375</sup>

The Kurdish autonomous administration (see 2.1.1.) also advocates tolerance of religious minorities in its area. The Alawites are an exception to this, not because of their religion, but because they are associated with the Alawite president and his government. As a result, they are at risk of being treated as adversaries. Ismailis are sometimes confused with Alawites and are therefore also at risk.<sup>376</sup>

Real or alleged political opponents of the Syrian authorities – including not just participants in demonstrations and armed resistance, but also aid workers (especially medics) and local government officials in current or former opposition areas – can fall victim to disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other human rights violations. The same is true of Alawite activists who are opponents of Assad. Political opponents of the Kurdish political party PYD can also face arrest and detention in the Kurdish region, without families being informed of their whereabouts.<sup>377</sup>

Various other resistance groups have also detained and/or murdered opponents and critics, such as Jaysh al Islam under the leadership of Zahran (deceased) and Mohamed Alloush.<sup>378</sup>

## 1.5 Human rights violations

Human rights violations are reported on the part of all parties to the armed conflict.

Various human rights organisations report that the Syrian authorities systematically violate human rights. This includes arbitrary and unlawful arrests and detentions, extrajudicial executions, torture, sexual violence and disappearances of large numbers of people. There is a deep-rooted practice of impunity on the part of the authorities. In the more than eight years of armed conflict in Syria, numerous war crimes and violations of the humanitarian laws of war<sup>379</sup> have been reported, such as the use of chemical weapons, the starving and forced displacement of civilian populations and the use of child soldiers. Since the beginning of the armed conflict, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been arrested, imprisoned and/or disappeared by the Syrian authorities without due process. Civilian targets such as hospitals, schools, water and electricity installations and bakeries have been deliberately bombed in opposition areas.<sup>380</sup>

Children have been killed or injured by the use of explosives in towns and villages. They have been deployed in the armed conflict and fallen victim to torture,

<sup>375</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=99288>; Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 25 March 2019; Confidential source, 23 March 2019.

<sup>376</sup> At the start of the Syrian civil war there were several attacks on Alawites in the government area, for example in Latakia. This has not happened since 2014. Confidential source, 12 April 2018; Confidential source, 13 April 2018; Confidential source, 19 April 2018; Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>377</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report Syria*, 17 February 2019; Confidential source, 13 April 2018.

<sup>378</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report Syria*, 17 February 2019.

<sup>379</sup> The humanitarian laws of war, also referred to as international humanitarian law, are a collection of rules that seek to limit the harmful effects of armed conflicts. One important aspect is the protection of people who are not participating (or have ceased to participate) in the conflict. <https://www.rodekruis.nl/over-ons/humanitaire-orlogsrecht/> consulted on 7 June 2019.

<sup>380</sup> Amnesty International, *Syria: Unlawful attacks by government forces hit civilians and medical facilities in Idlib*, 28 March 2019; OHCHR, *Press briefing note on Dar'a*, 21 May 2019, 21 May 2019; Confidential source, 27 November 2018. See the website of The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/>. In a conflict situation, the dividing line between violations of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law is fluid.

detention, kidnapping, sexual violence, and attacks on schools and hospitals.<sup>381</sup> In the report *Walls Have Ears, An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents*, the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) analyses 5,000 documents found in abandoned offices of the Syrian intelligence services. The analysis shows that the intelligence services have not only been guilty of serious human rights violations, but have also penetrated every aspect of life in Syria.<sup>382</sup>

In areas recaptured by the government and cities such as Douma, Dara'a and the northern part of the city of Homs, the Syrian government conducted a campaign of arbitrary arrests and detention following its bombardments.<sup>383</sup> Human rights violations both inside and outside displaced persons' camps are reported by the *Syrian Institute for Justice*, the *Syrian Justice and Accountability Center*, the *Syrian Medical Society*, *Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights* (LDHR) and Human Rights Watch.<sup>384</sup>

According to the SNHR, almost 14,000 people have died in Syrian prisons since March 2011, while 128,000 Syrians are still in detention or have disappeared. The conditions in the detention centres are terrible, and torture and sexual violence are practised.<sup>385</sup>

Detainees' families are asked to pay to ensure that prisoners receive food and are no longer tortured, which then does not happen. Large sums are paid to obtain the release of prisoners.<sup>386</sup>

According to one source, torture is less common in official detention centres than in those run by soldiers of the army's Fourth Division, led by President Assad's brother-in-law.<sup>387</sup> Torture survivors have organised themselves to document the torture. For example, the Syrian NGO LDHR documents cases of torture of survivors and tries to use the evidence in due course in legal proceedings against the responsible authorities.<sup>388</sup> On 12 February 2019, two Syrians were arrested in Germany on suspicion of involvement in torture.<sup>389</sup> Western NGOs have managed to get hold of more than 1.2 million files from the Syrian security services. These were smuggled out of the country during the period when the opposition controlled large parts of Syria.<sup>390</sup>

<sup>381</sup> UNICEF. *Whole of Syria Facts and Figures: Child Protection*, 29 January 2019.

<sup>382</sup> SJAC, *Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents*, 21 May 2019.

<sup>383</sup> It mainly targeted human rights activists, aid workers and also lawyers who were active before the Syrian authorities recaptured the area. There are lists of people, media activists, lawyers, human rights activists, and aid workers – especially those working in health care – who are targeted for having provided assistance, such as doctors who have provided medical assistance to wounded combatants. HRW, *Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas*, 21 May 2019; OHCHR, *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible*, 28 February 2019; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>384</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019; HRW, *Syria: Detention, Harassment in Retaken Areas*, 21 May 2019. The SOHR previously estimated the number at 16,000. Sednaya Prison is among those mentioned. Daily Sabah, *Almost 128,000 Syrians still captives in Assad regime prisons*, 13 March 2019; TRTWorld, *Syrian civil war enters its ninth year*, 15 March 2019; Confidential source, 27 November 2018; Confidential source, 29 November 2018; SOHR, *With the acceleration of the military and political processes, the regime's authorities hand over the names of thousands of their victims and raise to about 16000, the number of people who were verified casualties out of 60000 arrested casualties*, 28 July 2018.

<sup>385</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>386</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>387</sup> Experts from Doctors and Lawyers for Human Rights receive training by experts from UK Synergy and other international experts. LDHR uses the Istanbul Protocol for cases of torture and sexual violence. Confidential source, 20 March 2019; Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>388</sup> This is the first time that suspected torturers of the Syrian regime have been prosecuted in a western country. <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/topic/syria/>.

<sup>390</sup> <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/topic/syria/>.

Syrian refugees are trying to have President Assad tried by the International Criminal Court.<sup>391</sup>

#### *ICRC*

The *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)* has been present in Syria for 52 years. In September 2011, the ICRC was unexpectedly given access to a detention centre of the Ministry of the Interior in Syria for the first time. The ICRC has since visited a number of central detention centres of the Syrian authorities, but has not yet gained permission to question prisoners without the presence of witnesses, i.e. prison staff. The ICRC does not have access to opposition detention centres, but it does have access to SDF detainees in the north-east.<sup>392</sup>

The ICRC tries to use its access to detention centres to restore family ties and gain insight into the health situation in detention centres. In recent years, the ICRC has been able to open offices in the cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, Hasaka and Qamishli.<sup>393</sup> Since 2011 the ICRC has been in contact with family members who have provided information about people who have disappeared, often following their arrest. Investigations of missing persons in Syria extend to many countries where relatives of the missing persons live. The ICRC has collected testimonies from family members not just in Syria, but all over the world. The ICRC is approached on an almost daily basis by dozens of relatives of missing persons, who also conduct their own investigations.<sup>394</sup>

#### *Death announcements*

According to the SNHR, among others, the Syrian authorities sent out large numbers of death notifications in June and July 2018, including 1,000 in the city of Daraya. The deaths of 700 'disappeared' or arrested men and women from Hama were also confirmed by the authorities, including Palestinians from the Palestinian camp in Hama.<sup>395</sup> Families were informed of the deaths of their sons by the Civil Affairs Committee for Palestinian Refugees. The remains were not released. The two mosques in the camp were forbidden to disclose the names of the dead. A similar procedure was followed in other places.<sup>396</sup> Family members questioned the credibility of death notifications issued by the Syrian authorities four years after a family member disappeared.<sup>397</sup>

#### *Violations by militias and the opposition*

Militias and paramilitary groups affiliated with the Syrian government also regularly committed human rights violations. These included carrying out massacres, kidnapping civilians, arbitrary detention and the use of rape as a weapon of war.<sup>398</sup> Armed groups of the FSA were also guilty of arbitrary arrests, detention and abductions on a limited scale.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>391</sup> The Intercept, *Syrian Refugees Use Precedent Set in Rohingya Case to Try to Bring Government Officials Before the International Criminal Court*, 16 March 2019; Russia Today, *Attempt to prosecute Assad at ICC is aimed at undermining Syrian peace process*, 18 March 2018.

<sup>392</sup> The ICRC's visit protocol states that prisoners should be questioned without the local detention authorities being present. Confidential source, 24 March 2019. See also <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/feature/2012/12-07-detention-law.htm>.

<sup>393</sup> Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

<sup>394</sup> As far as is known, reprisals are not taken against these family members. Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

<sup>395</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2018/08/27/52615/>

<sup>396</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2018/08/27/52615/>. Confidential source, 27 November 2018; Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>397</sup> As far as is known, reprisals are not taken against these family members. Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

<sup>398</sup> UNGA, A/HRC/39/65, 9 August 2018. Human Rights Watch, *World Report Syria*, 17 February 2019.

<sup>399</sup> Some detainees of Al-A'mshat are alleged to have been killed. UNGA, A/HRC/39/65, 9 August 2018. See also SCF, *UN report details large-scale human rights abuses in Afrin under Turkish military control*, 8 July 2018; AI, *Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin*, 2 August 2018.

ISIS was guilty of mass human rights violations in areas under its control. As well as extrajudicial executions and the systematic persecution of those holding different religious views, there was also systematic rape, forced marriages and the keeping of sex slaves.<sup>400</sup>

The SNHR has documented 8,143 cases of persons detained by ISIS whose fate is not clear.<sup>401</sup>

HTS was guilty of various human rights violations, including bombings, abductions, unlawful detention and torture.<sup>402</sup> Many civilians were detained or abducted and held for ransom in Idlib and northern Aleppo.<sup>403</sup> For example, on 23 November 2018, Raed Fares, a human rights activist and maker of radio programmes, was shot dead by unknown gunmen along with another activist, Hamoud Jneed, while parking his car in Kafranbel in the opposition-controlled province of Idlib. Fares had been arrested or abducted by the HTS on several previous occasions.<sup>404</sup> At the end of 2018, the HTS arrested residents of the city of Idlib who were documenting abuses of power or who had protested against the HTS administration. Six detainees were tortured. In the last three months of 2018, according to Human Rights Watch, the HTS detained at least 184 suspected opponents in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib.<sup>405</sup> On 9 December 2018, HTS sentenced a journalist to death for collaborating with Israel and disclosing the whereabouts of armed groups.<sup>406</sup> On 3 March 2019, a public execution took place in the city of Idlib. HTS executed ten alleged members of an ISIS sleeper cell.<sup>407</sup> On 28 April 2019, HTS executed two alleged Syrian government spies in the city of Idlib.<sup>408</sup>

According to the SNHR, the armed wing of the Kurdish party PYD<sup>409</sup>, the YPG<sup>410</sup>, has arbitrarily arrested or disappeared at least 2,705 people.<sup>411</sup> According to one source, there are secret detention centres in which ISIS fighters are held who pose a real or assumed threat. International groups do not have access to these detention centres.<sup>412</sup>

### *White Helmets*

The *White Helmets* have recorded chemical attacks with cameras on their helmets. They have also collected samples and bomb fragments with Russian text on them, which were used during the attacks on hospitals and clinics. The material has since been transferred to a documentation centre.<sup>413</sup>

<sup>400</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report Syria*, 17 February 2019.

<sup>401</sup> HRW, *Syria: Reveal Fate of Missing Victims of ISIS*, 14 May 2019.

<sup>402</sup> HTS has many prisons (some of them unofficial) in areas including Okab, Harem, Idlib city, Sinjar and Aleppo. It has set up its own system of courts, in which sharia law is applied. The judges have not received formal legal training, and in some cases they have not received sharia training either. HRW, *Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group*, 28 January 2019.

<sup>403</sup> UNGA, *A/HRC/40/70*, 31 January 2019.

<sup>404</sup> Fares had a radio station (Radio Fresh) which persistently spread the ideas of the original, unarmed Syrian revolution. <https://act.thesyriacampaign.org/donate/support-radio-fresh/>.

<sup>405</sup> HRW, *Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group*, 28 January 2019.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Confidential source, 7 March 2019.

<sup>408</sup> Confidential source, 2 May 2019.

<sup>409</sup> The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD).

<sup>410</sup> The YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG: People's Protection Units) is the armed wing of the PYD.

<sup>411</sup> <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2019/06/24/53829/>.

<sup>412</sup> Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>413</sup> In the Netherlands, a copy has been examined and archived by the Forensic Institute. Chatham House, *Assad Has Learned That Chemical Attacks Are a Tactic That Works*, 13 April 2018; Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

In Quneitra and Dara'a, according to one source, the Russian and Syrian governments did not allow aid workers to be evacuated to Idlib.<sup>414</sup> The systematic information campaign against the White Helmets and earlier experiences of the capture of White Helmets after the fall of Aleppo at the end of 2016 led the organisation to undertake a major evacuation of White Helmets and their families via Israel to Jordan in July 2018.<sup>415</sup>

On 1 March 2019, the OPCW confirmed that an investigation had shown that chemical weapons were used in the 7 April 2017 attack on Douma.<sup>416</sup> Research teams from BBC Panorama and BBC Arabic investigated in detail 164 reports of chemical attacks in the period 2014 to 2018. In total, they found evidence of 106 attacks, all but three of which were carried out by the Syrian government. The other poison gas attacks are thought to have been carried out by rebel groups.<sup>417</sup> According to the think tank *Chatham House*, nothing frightens people more than chemical weapons. When they are deployed, the population flees – and rarely returns in the short term.<sup>418</sup>

## 1.6 Humanitarian situation

According to OCHA, at the beginning of 2019 a total of 11.7 out of 18.4 million<sup>419</sup> people in Syria were in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.2 million displaced persons. Based on humanitarian principles, the Netherlands contributes to assistance throughout Syria to address the cases of greatest need.<sup>420</sup>

The overall humanitarian situation in different parts of Syria is still a matter for grave concern. In the eighth year of the crisis in Syria, the three most serious emergency situations occurred in eastern Ghouta, Afrin and south-western Dara'a. According to the UN, at the end of 2018 an estimated 1.16 million people were living in areas that were difficult for humanitarian organisations to reach. In some areas the operational possibilities for humanitarian organisations to provide assistance are limited by the security situation, but the greatest restrictions are imposed by the

<sup>414</sup> The White Helmets rescue organisation, whose name refers to the helmets that emergency workers wear during rescue operations, was established in 2014. Precursors of this voluntary aid organisation have been working in cities such as Aleppo and Douma since the end of 2012 to warn civilians about air strikes and pull people out of the rubble after a bombing. In the West, the White Helmets are seen as heroes because of their rescue operations after bombings. The Syrian authorities and their ally Russia regard them as an extension of 'terrorist groups'. The aid workers have been equipped with cameras with which they have also recorded countless war crimes by Syria and Russia. BBC News, *Syria conflict: White Helmets evacuated by Israel*, 22 July 2018; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>415</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>416</sup> OPCW, *OPCW Issues Fact-Finding Mission Report on Chemical Weapons Use Allegation in Douma, Syria, in 2018*, 1 March 2019.

<sup>417</sup> Brooks, Julia, et al. "Responding to chemical weapons violations in Syria: legal, health, and humanitarian recommendations." *Conflict and health* 12.1 (2018): 12. Report of the fact-finding mission regarding the incident of alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018. <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019/03/s-1731-2019%28e%29.pdf>; <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2019/01/opcw-spokespersons-statement-allegation-chemical-weapons-use-aleppo-syria> ; <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2018/07/opcw-issues-fact-finding-mission-reports-chemical-weapons-use-allegations>.

<sup>418</sup> See Chatham House, *Assad Has Learned That Chemical Attacks Are a Tactic That Works*, 13 April 2018.

<sup>419</sup> <https://www.who.int/countries/syr/en/>.

<sup>420</sup> Internationally, in terms of its financial contribution the Netherlands is the sixth largest donor for the Syria region, including Syria's neighbouring countries. The Netherlands provides humanitarian assistance in Syria itself through various channels including UN organisations and the Red Cross and through the *Dutch Relief Alliance – Syria Joint Response*. Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

Syrian authorities, causing humanitarian organisations to be repeatedly denied access to certain sections of the population.<sup>421</sup>

In 2018, as a result of conflicts and local reconciliation agreements in former opposition areas such as eastern Ghouta and the north of Homs province, more than 550,000 newly displaced people moved to opposition areas in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama.<sup>422</sup> This has led to an unprecedentedly high concentration of people in a limited area with limited capacity for service provision. Some IDP camps had an occupancy level of 120% at the end of 2018. It is estimated that by the end of 2018, nearly four million people were living in north-western Syria, including nearly three million in opposition areas in Idlib, western Aleppo province, northern Hama province, and eastern Latakia province. Of the 1.9 million displaced persons, 417,501 were living in 336 IDP camps.<sup>423</sup>

At the end of November 2018, more than 12,000 IDPs from Afrin were sheltering in empty houses in villages. More than 83,730 IDPs were receiving support from five UNHCR partner organisations: the *Syria Society of Social Development* (SSSD), Al Ihsan, Namma, SARC *Human Support Project* (HSP) and *Syria Trust*.<sup>424</sup>

The crisis has greatly impaired Syrians' ability to provide for themselves, and at least four-fifths of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>425</sup> There are serious humanitarian needs across the country, but at the end of the reporting period, the situation in north-western Syria (Idlib), in north-eastern Syria (Al Hol camp), in the south-west and around the Rukban camp was particularly concerning.<sup>426</sup> The sharp escalation of the situation around Idlib led to large-scale displacement and increasing numbers of dead and injured. More than 270,000 civilians were displaced and more than 160 killed between 1 and 22 May.<sup>427</sup> During the bombing, an estimated 20 hospitals and health facilities and 25 schools were hit. In the south of the province of Idlib and around Aleppo and Hama, some NGOs had to suspend their activities due to the high level of insecurity or the fact that the relief workers had themselves become displaced.<sup>428</sup>

In December 2018, according to Unicef, 5.6 million children were in poor conditions in Syria as a result of the civil war in a total population of 18.4 million. During this period, according to Unicef, more than 2.5 million Syrian children registered by UNHCR were out of the country, out of a total of nearly 5.7 million Syrians

<sup>421</sup> After 92,000 civilians left or were evacuated from eastern Ghouta in March 2018, about 77,000 civilians were accommodated in tent camps in the province of Damascus. UNHCR, *Syria Factsheet (January - November 2018)*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>422</sup> In November 2018, around 40,000 displaced persons from the provinces of Homs, Hama and Aleppo moved to the province of Idlib after bombing along the front line of the demilitarised zone. The provision of humanitarian aid was hampered by armed groups and local authorities, insecurity and crime. UNHCR, *Cross-Border Humanitarian Response Fact Sheet - Northwest Syria - December 2018*, 31 December 2018. OCHA, *Turkey/Syria: Cross-Border Humanitarian Reach and Activities from Turkey - November 2018*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>423</sup> UNHCR, *Cross-Border Humanitarian Response Fact Sheet - Northwest Syria - December 2018*, 31 December 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Overview of Humanitarian Response from within Syria (January - November 2018)*, 30 November 2018; Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northeast Syria, November 2018*, 30 November 2018; ACLED, *The risks of reconciliation: civilians and former fighters face continued threats in Syria*, 25 January 2019.

<sup>424</sup> In January 2018, an estimated 151,000 people were driven from their homes in the Afrin region during the military Operation Olive Branch. Most of them were given shelter in Tal Refaat, Nubul, Zahra and Fafin in the province of Aleppo. UNHCR, *Syria Factsheet (January - November 2018)*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>425</sup> The lack of financial means alone prevented many displaced persons from returning to the area where they originally came from. Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>426</sup> Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>427</sup> OCHA, *Syria: Situation Report 4: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria*, 31 May 2019.

<sup>428</sup> Confidential source, 6 June 2019.



registered as refugees.<sup>429</sup> In early March 2019, the UN announced that more children had been killed in 2018 than in previous years. 1,016 children were killed in 2018.<sup>430</sup>

### *Food*

Millions of Syrians in all 14 provinces of the country depend on food aid, which is provided by various organisations. Especially in areas which are under siege or hard to access, the stopping of food convoys is used by the Syrian authorities as a means of exerting political pressure. This regularly impedes timely and continuous delivery. Starvation seems to have been used as a military tactic in the recapture of besieged areas by the Syrian authorities.<sup>431</sup>

It is estimated that one-third of the Syrian population has no food security. Chronic malnutrition is prevalent in some areas. Palestinian refugees in Syria in particular were still vulnerable to displacement, loss of property and the destruction of their neighbourhoods.<sup>432</sup>

### *Health care*

After years of conflict, the quality of Syrian health care has seriously deteriorated. Bombing by the Syrian and Russian armies has damaged hospitals and other medical facilities, putting them completely or partially out of action. Between 2011 and 2017, there were 492 attacks on hospitals and clinics, killing 847 health workers. In the first nine months of 2018, 97 people died and 165 were injured in attacks on medical facilities.<sup>433</sup> Between the end of April and mid-May 2019, 19 medical facilities were bombed according to the *Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations-USA*.<sup>434</sup>

In Idlib and eastern Ghouta in particular, medical centres were targeted in attacks by the Syrian authorities. In addition, there was a shortage of medical personnel, because medics had fled or been killed in the violence. Medical materials and medicines were also in short supply, especially in besieged areas. As a result, many children were not vaccinated.<sup>435</sup>

Some facilities in former opposition areas have been repaired, but have not been restored to pre-2010 levels. In most areas, facilities have not been repaired; in fact, more and more health facilities are being attacked, as is the case in Idlib.<sup>436</sup> Education and health care have fallen far behind.<sup>437</sup> The UN estimates that almost half of the health facilities are either closed or only partly functional, as a direct result of the hostilities. The protection of care providers and medical staff is a serious concern; dozens of aid workers have already been killed in 2019.<sup>438</sup>

### *Education*

<sup>429</sup> UNICEF *Syria Crisis Situation Report - November 2018*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>430</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/2018-deadliest-year-yet-children-syria-war-enters-9th-year>.

<sup>431</sup> WFP, *WFP Syria Situation Report #3, March 2019*, 30 March 2019.

<sup>432</sup> OCHA, *2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic*, 1 March 2019. WFP, *Syria Situation Report #4, April 2019*, 30 April 2019. See also <https://hno-syria.org/#home>.

<sup>433</sup> SAMCF, *Impacts of attacks on healthcare in Syria*, 19 October 2018.

<sup>434</sup> NPR, *In Syria, Reports Of 19 Medical Facilities Bombed Since April 28*, 17 May 2019.

<sup>435</sup> SAMCF, *Impacts of attacks on healthcare in Syria*, 19 October 2018.

<sup>436</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-conflict-eight-years-devastation-and-destruction-health-system>.

<sup>437</sup> Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

<sup>438</sup> OCHA, *2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic*, 1 March 2019.

The conflict has had a major impact on the percentage of school-going children. Because many children have been displaced and a quarter of schools are not in use,<sup>439</sup> many children are unable to attend primary or secondary education.<sup>440</sup>

In some opposition-controlled areas, the official Syrian curriculum is followed in schools, but without references to the Baath Party and Assad. However, in areas where a different curriculum is used, children run the risk of falling behind because the education they have followed and any certificates or diplomas obtained for it are not recognised by the Syrian authorities.<sup>441</sup>

There are hundreds of thousands of children in opposition areas in need of primary schooling. Their schools are shelled during attacks by government forces.<sup>442</sup>

#### *Recapture of opposition areas*

In July 2018, pro-government forces launched Operation Basalt to recapture southern Syria from the armed groups<sup>443</sup> of the Southern Front.<sup>444</sup> Large-scale bombing caused hundreds of thousands of Syrians to flee to the south-west, where they became stranded at the border with Jordan.<sup>445</sup> Jordan had closed its border after a bomb attack in June 2016, and also stated that the country had already received 660,000 registered Syrian refugees and was unable to handle a new influx. Previously, 50,000 Syrians had become stuck in the desert area on the Syrian-Jordanian border known as 'the berm'.<sup>446</sup> They found shelter in an informal displacement camp near Rukban, a remote hamlet close to the point where three countries' borders meet in the desert, because Jordan would not let them in. In the Rukban camp, civilians live alongside fighters and criminal gangs are active.<sup>447</sup> Tens of thousands of displaced persons also sought refuge on the border between the Syrian part and the Israeli-annexed part of the Golan Heights.<sup>448</sup> In Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated on 1 July 2018 that the country 'will not allow access to our territory'. The Israeli army did, however, deliver aid packages to a limited extent across the border.<sup>449</sup>

<sup>439</sup> Schools have been destroyed, there are no teaching staff, or school buildings are being used as shelters for displaced persons.

<sup>440</sup> Unicef, *UNICEF Syria Crisis Situation Report - April 2019 Humanitarian Results*, 30 April 2019.

<sup>441</sup> Borgenproject.org, *Education in Syria Has Continued Despite Civil War*, 8 February 2019.

<sup>442</sup> One source reports that a 14-year-old child leaving school is an easy target for all radical groups. They give him a gun and 5,000 or 10,000 Syrian pounds, and once he has the gun in his hand his brain stops working. Confidential source, 20 March 2019. See also Unicef, *UNICEF Syria Crisis Situation Report - April 2019 Humanitarian Results*, 30 April 2019.

<sup>443</sup> For an enumeration of all these groups see Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018.

<sup>444</sup> The Southern Front was an alliance established in February 2014 of more than 50 unstructured armed opposition groups associated with the Free Syrian Army. Its approximately 30,000 fighters were led by the *Military Operations Command* (MOC) in Jordan. BBC News, *Syria war: Southern rebels see US as key to success*, 9 December 2014; Carter Center, *Syria - Countrywide Conflict Report No. 5*, February 2015; Bellingcat, *Syrian Opposition Factions in the Syrian Civil War*, 13 August 2016; ICG, *Middle East Report N°187 - Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 21 June 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 2*, 2 July 2018; IRIN, *UN fears new Syrian offensive could stand up to 200,000 civilians*, 25 June 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 3*, 19 July 2018. The Guardian, *Syrian government forces seal victory in southern territories*, 31 July 2018.

<sup>445</sup> IRIN, *UN fears new Syrian offensive could stand up to 200,000 civilians*, 25 June 2018.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>448</sup> Most of them slept out in the open. The area where Israeli settlements are now was Syrian territory until the Six Day War in 1967. In 1974, Syria and Israel agreed on a ceasefire line, with a buffer zone that has had to be monitored by a UN force since then. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019.

<sup>449</sup> A number of victims of the bombing were also treated in Israeli hospitals. Israel has provided medical and other humanitarian support to Syrians in the border areas since 2013. Baresh, Manhal. *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*. European University Institute, 2019. Oxford Analytica, *Syrian reconstruction plans may block refugee return*, 6 July 2018.

On 21 July 2018, the Israeli army brought hundreds of members of the *Syria Civil Defence*, also known as *White Helmets*<sup>450</sup>, from south-western Syria via Israel to Jordan.<sup>451</sup>

Despite the hostilities, UN and other humanitarian organisations provided tents, food, health care and education to hundreds of thousands of Syrians on the Jordanian border.<sup>452</sup> In addition, organisations used mobile clinics to provide emergency psychological support to those who had fled the violence. Mobile teams also provided information to displaced persons about the risks of abandoned landmines.<sup>453</sup> Many of those who had been displaced made their way to camps and villages in the province of Quneitra, near the Golan Heights.<sup>454</sup> To this day, humanitarian workers have virtually no access to this area.

Conditions on the Jordanian border were particularly harsh, with desert storms and temperatures of up to 45 degrees in the summer. Children and women died from the effects of polluted drinking water, dehydration and scorpion bites. Some seriously ill people were admitted to hospitals in Ramtha and Irbid in Jordan.<sup>455</sup>

The provision of humanitarian aid from Jordan was made harder by the poor security situation and was subject to political decisions. Food convoys sometimes faced long waits before they could cross the border at Ramtha.<sup>456</sup> After the Nasib border crossing between Jordan and Syria was reopened, tens of thousands of displaced persons returned to their villages in early July 2019. However, more than 200,000 displaced persons remained in south-western Syria. At that point, they were dependent on food aid, which could no longer be delivered across the border via Jordan. From then on, aid was provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) and NGOs and distributed by the *Syrian Arab Red Crescent* (SARC), the Syrian branch of the International Federation of the Red Cross.<sup>457</sup> NGOs from Amman and Damascus provided health care to displaced persons in the area in conjunction with the SARC and local authorities in Jordan and Syria.<sup>458</sup> In addition to people living in the combat zone being forced to leave their homes, emergency workers also had to flee or ran out of supplies.<sup>459</sup> NGOs asked the Syrian authorities for protection in order to continue working after the Syrian army had recaptured the areas.<sup>460</sup> In most cases, permission was not given and NGOs, UN organisations and local aid workers were unable to gain humanitarian access in order to provide assistance. This problem and the prolonged hostilities created food and fuel shortages, pushing up prices and making assistance more difficult.<sup>461</sup>

The provision of assistance by NGOs from Damascus encountered problems because the NGOs were refused the permits they needed to reach the displaced persons in

<sup>450</sup> For details about the White Helmets see page 49.

<sup>451</sup> Due to the rapid advance of the Syrian army in the south-western province of Dara'a, the rescue workers had nowhere to go. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44915099>.

<sup>452</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 2*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> OCHA, *Jordan | Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 4*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Permission to cross had to be given by the Syrian authorities. OCHA, *Jordan | Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Qunaitra, Sweida Flash Update No. 4*, 2 July 2018.

<sup>457</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 2*, 12 July 2018. See the website of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent: <http://sarc.sy/>.

<sup>458</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 2*, 12 July 2018.

<sup>459</sup> Thousands of Syrians were earning USD 200 to 300 per month at clinics, schools, police units, local councils and NGOs up to the time of the retaking of this territory. Their salaries were paid by foreign donors. After the recapture, many lost their jobs and kept their past hidden from the security forces. ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>460</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida - Situation Report No. 3*, 19 July 2018.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

the province of Quneitra. In many cases, permission was not granted either for carrying out needs assessments, or for actually providing and monitoring assistance.<sup>462</sup> Medicines were sent from Damascus to clinics in recaptured areas, albeit in drastically insufficient volumes.<sup>463</sup> Legal aid teams from local NGOs, supported by UNHCR, provided as much information as possible to displaced persons at various locations in the province of Dara'a about personal documents, especially identity cards and birth certificates.<sup>464</sup> At the beginning of August 2018, the UN called for immediate access to the 184,000 displaced persons in the south-west.<sup>465</sup> After the hostilities ended, most displaced persons in this area returned to their villages.<sup>466</sup> Once the Syrian government had taken over the area, cross-border assistance from Jordan was no longer possible. Since then, aid has had to come from Syria, but in many cases humanitarian aid is still being seriously delayed or not allowed.<sup>467</sup>

#### *North-western Syria*

The large number of displaced persons in Idlib has put a lot of pressure on the limited assistance available in the area. Humanitarian organisations operate from Turkey to provide assistance in the area. Due to the constant unrest and insecurity, humanitarian organisations' freedom of movement is limited. Heavy rains led to flooding at the end of October 2018, causing serious problems for around 400,000 IDPs in improvised tent camps. There are major humanitarian aid shortages in all sectors. One major problem is lack of space to accommodate people.<sup>468</sup> Health care was the main priority in the north and west of Aleppo province. Many residents found it difficult or impossible to go to hospitals or clinics due to lack of transport or the high cost of it.<sup>469</sup> The food supply was the main priority in Idlib. According to the World Food Programme, 6.5 million Syrians, many of whom live in Idlib, suffer from an acute shortage of food.<sup>470</sup>

The NGO *REACH Initiative* conducts a monthly survey of the humanitarian situation in Syria in terms of displacement, shelter, health care, water supply and hygiene, food safety, income and education. For the November 2018 fact sheet on north-western Syria, Reach collected information in 840 locations in the provinces of Idlib (262), northern and western Aleppo (482), Hama (92) and Homs (4).<sup>471</sup>

In November 2018, UNHCR and partner agencies provided assistance to displaced persons and host families in 261 towns and villages in 51 sub-districts in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Deir al-Zor and Hasaka. The assistance consisted of socio-psychological support, tracing of family members and family reunification, combating sexual violence and exploitation of children and providing information about documents. UNHCR is one of the smaller care providers in the north-west; NGOs such as the NRC, WVI, Warchild, Mercy Corps and UN organisations have far greater capacity.<sup>472</sup> See also 4.3

<sup>462</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 4*, 29 July 2018. OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 5*, 3 August 2018.

<sup>463</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 4*, 29 July 2018.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Dara'a, Quneitra, Sweida - Situation Report No. 5*, 3 August 2018.

<sup>466</sup> Confidential source, 27 March 2019.

<sup>467</sup> Confidential source, 31 May 2019.

<sup>468</sup> Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, October 2018*, 31 October 2018. See also Unicef, *In northern Aleppo's Fafin camp in Syria, families prepare for winter*, 6 January 2019; UNHCR, *Syria Refugee Response: Informal Settlements - Flood Risks in the coming 72 hours*, 8 January 2019; ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>469</sup> Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, October 2018*, 31 October 2018.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid. <https://www1.wfp.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic>.

<sup>471</sup> Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, October 2018*, 31 October 2018.

<sup>472</sup> UNHCR, *Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey): Response Snapshot (as of 30 November 2018)*, 20 December 2018.

## 1.7 Travel

### *Airports*

Damascus airport is open. Its website lists the following destinations: Abu Dhabi (last in July 2018), Al-Najaf, Baghdad, Basra (last on 3 June 2019), Dubai (last in July 2018), Doha Hamad (last in July 2018), Kuwait and Sharjah.<sup>473</sup> However, there are also flights to Tehran, Al-Qamishli, Khartoum, Muscat, Erbil and Moscow.<sup>474</sup> The airports at Aleppo, Al-Qamishli and Lattakia are also open. The national airline Syrian Air, formerly Syrian Arab Airlines, also flies to Lattakia.<sup>475</sup>

### *Major roads*

Two strategically positioned motorways, the M4 that runs from Saraqib to Lattakia and the M5 that runs from the border with Jordan via Damascus to Aleppo, pass through Idlib. In early May 2016, there was heavy fighting over the control of these roads in Idlib. The cities of Jisr al-Shughour, al-Latamenah and Ma'arat al-Numan were bombed.<sup>476</sup> There are said to be around six checkpoints on the road from Beirut to Damascus. Speed checks take place on the road. There is a checkpoint for drivers exiting the motorway.<sup>477</sup> There are said to be four checkpoints on the road from Al-Sweida to Damascus.<sup>478</sup> The major roads in the north-east are easily accessible, with checkpoints near the cities.<sup>479</sup> When there is fighting, roads and checkpoints are closed. Roads can also be closed in bad weather conditions.<sup>480</sup>

### *Checkpoints*

Almost all checkpoints of the Syrian authorities are able to check a person's background and their status as regards military service. Background checks are thought to be made with six different government agencies (security services and the army). A laptop may be present at the checkpoint, on which the names of those passing through can be checked, or telephone inquiries may be made.<sup>481</sup> Checkpoints are not always static: they can be moved and the available equipment (including computer) can change. The fact that a person is able to pass through without any checks on one day is no guarantee that this will also be the case the following day. Incidentally, the checkpoints generally do not have the capacity to check every individual (in detail). In addition, even those not being sought by the authorities can also experience problems at a checkpoint, such as being temporarily detained and only allowed to pass after paying a bribe. Government-linked checkpoints can be manned by various groups, including pro-government militia fighters, Lebanese Hezbollah militants and Iranian militia members. All these factors contribute to a lack of transparent procedure at Syrian government checkpoints.<sup>482</sup>

<sup>473</sup> [https://www.damascus-airport.com/en/destinations\\_damascus\\_airport.php](https://www.damascus-airport.com/en/destinations_damascus_airport.php).

<sup>474</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019. See <https://www.airportia.com/syria/damascus-international-airport/routes/>. See <https://chamwings.com/where-we-fly/>. The road from Afrin to Aleppo is closed. Some wealthy Kurds from Afrin have paid money and travelled to Qamishli with the help of smugglers. From there they fly to Damascus and then go via Damascus to Aleppo. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>475</sup> The last Damascus – Lattakia flight was in August 2018. See: <https://www.airportia.com/syria/bassel-al-assad-international-airport/routes/>. As far as is known, no other airports in Syria other than those mentioned are open. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-offensive-view-damascus>.

<sup>476</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>477</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>478</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Relatives of conscription evaders or deserters may therefore experience problems at a checkpoint, but it is not known on what scale this occurs. Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>481</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 22 March 2019; Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

In the north of Homs province, the Russian military police operated checkpoints together with rebel forces.<sup>483</sup>

In the province of Dara'a, citizens who have regularised their status with the government receive a declaration from the military intelligence service that they are allowed to pass checkpoints. However, other security services which have their own checkpoints reportedly initially ignored such declarations. As a result, the declarations failed to provide adequate protection against arrest. By the end of 2018, the situation seemed to have improved somewhat.<sup>484</sup>

The approach taken at the opposition checkpoints also varies. This is partly due to the severe fragmentation of coalitions such as the Free Syrian Army and HTS. It is not always clear to outsiders by which faction a checkpoint is manned. However, some of these checkpoints bear the flag of the relevant faction.<sup>485</sup>

What the vast majority of checkpoints have in common – both those of the government and those of the opposition – is that people have to give bribes before they can go on their way.<sup>486</sup> This practice has become so commonplace that one source speaks of a checkpoint economy.<sup>487</sup>

## 1.8 Border crossings

From Turkey, the UN uses two border crossings to Syria: from Rahanly in Hatay to Bab al Hawa in the Idlib de-escalation zone, and from Kilis to Bab al Salam in the Euphrates Shield Zone. There are a further 16 border posts between Turkey and Syria, of which the Turkish Red Crescent (Half Moon) can use 11. On the Syrian side of the border in the province of Idlib, the border crossing at Bab al Hawa alone is controlled by HTS.<sup>488</sup> The border between Turkey and Afrin was also opened in March 2019.<sup>489</sup>

Some of the 16 border crossings between Turkey and Syria are directly controlled by the Turkish army, and others by the Turkish Ministry of the Interior.<sup>490</sup>

On the border between Lebanon and Syria, Masnaa is the most important official border crossing. It is open. There are also the border crossings at Arida and Dabousieh (Abbudiye) to the east of Arida. Dabousieh is the most important border crossing point in the north.<sup>491</sup>

<sup>483</sup> ICG, *Middle East Report N°187 - Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 21 June 2018.

<sup>484</sup> In some cases, the Russian military police come to the rescue. Those who were arrested were interrogated and released after a few hours or days. ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>485</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>486</sup> In this context, one source provided the following information. There are contacts who maintain ties with the Syrian government. For a payment of USD 3,000, such a contact can drive someone from Damascus to Beirut without being checked at checkpoints of the Syrian authorities. Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>487</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>488</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019. See also Accord, *Administering a borderland at war: Bab al-Hawa in Syria*, November 2018; Gov.UK, *Alert for charities operating in Syria or Turkey about aid passing through the Bab Al-Hawa crossing*, 3 December 2018.

<sup>489</sup> <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/75373?lang=en>.

<sup>490</sup> For an overview of these border crossings, see <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78430>. Confidential source, 22 March 2019. Marks, Jesse, and Hardin Lang. "Civilians Imperiled: Humanitarian Implications of US Policy Shifts In Syria." (2019).

<sup>491</sup> For more details see <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78430>. People also cross the border illegally and can, if they wish, obtain an entry stamp later on in return for payment. Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

The border crossing between Jordan and Syria near Nasib was reopened on 15 October 2018. The border town of Ramtha is on the Jordanian side.<sup>492</sup>

There is a long border between Syria and Iraq. The most important border post is Rabia; there is also a border crossing at Waleed. ISIS fighters crossed over to Iraq in the Ba'aj and Sinjar border areas where they are hiding. UN missions from Iraq and humanitarian aid missions cross the border to Syria at Rabia.<sup>493</sup>

The only border crossing between northern Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan) and north-eastern Syria is the unofficial Semalka border crossing north of Faysh Khabur.<sup>494</sup>

## 1.9 Ethnic or religious changes of areas

A tactic of forcing people out in order to change the demographic composition of an area seems to be used by several parties. This tactic is creating more homogeneous areas in ethnically and religiously diverse Syria. The forced evacuations of civilians, fighters and their relatives from areas recaptured by the authorities are usually regarded as demographic manipulation. Sunni Arabs in particular are being relocated in this way to Idlib and Aleppo provinces in the north and to a lesser extent to the south.<sup>495</sup>

A study by the *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies* shows that the population of the city of Damascus increased from 1,754,000 in 2011 to 2,292,000 in 2016. The population growth was mainly caused by a rise in the number of Shiites from 24,000 to 271,000. In addition, the Sunni population increased from 1,583,000 to 1,867,000 due to internal migration from other parts of Syria.<sup>496</sup>

The population of Rif Damashq province decreased from 2,836,000 in 2011 to 1,437,000 in 2016. The share of the Sunni population fell from 2,460,000 to 783,000; at the same time, the Shiite population rose from 26,000 to 350,000.<sup>497</sup>

The population of Homs province decreased from 1,803,000 in 2011 to 1,052,000 in 2016. The share of the Sunni population fell from 1,154,000 to 221,000; at the same time, the Shiite population rose from 38,000 to 299,000.<sup>498</sup>

<sup>492</sup> Relations between Syria and Jordan were seriously damaged following reports of the fate of Jordanian citizens who had been arrested by the Syrian authorities after the opening of the border. Reuters, *Jordan and Syria reopen Nassib border crossing*, 15 October 2018; <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78430>; Al Monitor, *Jordan-Syria ties stumble over fate of Jordanian detainees*, 22 April 2019; Asharq al-Awsat, *Exclusive – 2 Jordanians Recount Horrors of Detention in Syrian Regime Prisons*, 29 April 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77094>.

<sup>493</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019. See Accord, *Administering a borderland at war: Bab al-Hawa in Syria*, November 2018.

<sup>494</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019; Shafaaq, *Heavy rains flood Syria-Iraq border crossing vital to Kurds*, 25 March 2019.

<sup>495</sup> UNGA, *A/HRC/39/65*, 9 August 2018.

<sup>496</sup> Since the Sunnis started the uprising against Assad, they are usually the ones who are displaced. According to the King Faisal Center, taking figures from UNHCR as its basis, one million Iraqis were already in Syria in 2007, 57% of whom were Shiites. According to the King Faisal Center, the Syrian regime offers Syrian nationality to Shiite fighters who fight alongside Iran in Syria. President Assad is reported to have said that Syria belongs to those who defend the country, not those who have a Syrian passport. King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic studies, *"Useful Syria" and Demographic Changes in Syria*, 2017. See also Syria Deeply, *The Syrian Civil War & Demographic Change*, 17 March 2017; The Syria Institute, *No Return to Homs*, 21 February 2017.

<sup>497</sup> King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic studies, *"Useful Syria" and Demographic Changes in Syria*, 2017.

<sup>498</sup> The King Faisal Center does not provide detailed information about the origin of the Shiites. The Syrian architect Marwa al-Sabouni, one of the winners of the Prince Claus Awards in 2018, continued to work in her home city of Homs during the war. Before the war, Homs was a fairly prosperous city with more than a million inhabitants, but it was subsequently largely reduced to ruins. She wrote an autobiography about her experiences, *'The Battle for Home, The Memoir of a Syrian Architect'*. According to Marwa al-Sabouni, the seeds of the war were partly sown by sub-standard buildings and new districts that were constructed well before the fighting began. By contrast

In Operation Olive Branch, carried out by Turkish troops and their FSA allies<sup>499</sup> in early 2018, many Kurds from the Afrin district – which at that time had 320,000 (mainly Kurdish) inhabitants – were driven out.<sup>500</sup> Their homes were looted and confiscated and used for military purposes or shelter for FSA fighters and their families. Residents were told that they could no longer live in the area due to their alleged support for the YPG. Fighters from eastern Ghouta moved into the homes of the Kurds who fled.<sup>501</sup> By the beginning of August 2018, 98,000 Kurds who had fled from Afrin were registered in the towns of Tal Refaat, Nabul and Zahraa.<sup>502</sup> The displaced Kurds there were not given permission to return to Afrin. According to one source, it was unclear whether they were refused permission by the PYD, the Syrian government or Turkey.<sup>503</sup> Another source indicates that their return has been impeded by both the SDF and the Syrian government.<sup>504</sup> After the bombing of the Ghouta region around Damascus, many families moved north for safety reasons. This was not because they were opponents of the government, but because they were usually arrested if they returned. According to one source, this was a deliberate attempt to change the demographic composition of the population. A source states that the Syrian authorities are bringing large numbers of Iraqi Shiites to Ghouta.<sup>505</sup> According to one source, Sunnis and Christians are prevented from returning to their homes in Damascus.<sup>506</sup> According to another source, before the outbreak of the conflict, many Christians and Druze lived in Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus, whereas it is mainly inhabited by Sunnis now.<sup>507</sup>

In addition, the Syrian authorities and opposition exchanged population groups. For example, the government evacuated opposition fighters and civilians from Yarmouk, while HTS transferred civilians from the predominantly Shiite towns of Fu'ah and Kafraya in Idlib province to the government-controlled area. From Yarmouk, a Palestinian district of Damascus, 7,000 civilians, mostly Palestinians, were transferred to IDP camps near Yalda, Babila and Beit Saham in South Damascus.<sup>508</sup>

with the very heterogeneous old city centre, the authorities allocated these districts to particular ethnic or religious groups. As a result, communities became increasingly alienated from each other. King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic studies, *"Useful Syria" and Demographic Changes in Syria*, 2017; NRC, *'Vluchten was voor ons niet het antwoord'*, 5 September 2018.

<sup>499</sup> Including Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Nukhba, Jaish al-Sharqiya, Jabhat al-Shamiya and Nur al-Din al-Zinki. See also ICG, *Middle East Briefing N°63 - Saving Idlib from Destruction*, 3 September 2018.

<sup>500</sup> UNGA, *A/HRC/39/65*, 9 August 2018.

<sup>501</sup> Those who were forced to leave Afrin were neither informed nor given any form of compensation. Some of their homes that have been left behind have now been occupied by displaced persons from eastern Ghouta. It is not known whether they will have to pay rent, but it is thought not. There is no way for international human rights organisations to monitor and report on this. UNGA, *A/HRC/39/65*, 9 August 2018; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>502</sup> Other sources talk of 150,000. UNGA, *A/HRC/39/65*, 9 August 2018; Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>503</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>504</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>505</sup> According to some sources, the government's main purpose is to make Ghouta an area where political supporters live. Iranians in Syria are trying to convert Sunnis to Shia Islam. Confidential source, 20 March 2019; Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>506</sup> Attempts are being made in Damascus to buy up their houses. Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>507</sup> Many displaced persons and Iraqi refugees live in Jaramana. According to one source, the population in Jaramana is very conservative. It may include displaced persons from former ISIS areas. Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>508</sup> UNGA, *A/HRC/39/65*, 9 August 2018.



## 2 The Kurdish region

### 2.1.1 Governance

The *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (NES) included three self-proclaimed cantons from 2012: Jazira (corresponding to Hasaka province), Kobani and Afrin (a district in the province of Aleppo).<sup>509</sup> Following the loss of Afrin in March 2018, this Kurdish federation now consists only of Kobani and Jazira. The federation is governed by the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD). Supporters of the PYD call the federation *Rojava*. Most of the Kurdish opposition to the PYD is united in the *Kurdish National Council* (KNC).<sup>510</sup> The KNC is part of the UN-recognised opposition united in the *Syrian Negotiation Commission*.<sup>511</sup> The PYD is not part of the opposition and has cooperated with the Syrian authorities at various times during the conflict.<sup>512</sup>

Where the Kurdish region is mentioned in this report, only the territory of the federation is meant. In this chapter, a few paragraphs are also devoted to the situation in (Arab) areas under the control of the *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF), a combat group that largely consists of fighters from the YPG, the military wing of the PYD.<sup>513</sup>

The YPG and the SDF are in control of an area that is larger than the federation. In north-eastern Syria, they control about a quarter of all Syrian territory. The area includes the province of Hasaka, the part of the province of Aleppo around Manbij and Kobani, the area around Tel Rifaat and, following the conquest of the area from ISIS in 2017, most of the province of Raqqqa and the part of Deir al-Zor province north-east of the Euphrates. In March 2018, the YPG and the SDF lost control of the district of Afrin in Aleppo province. This area is now in the hands of the Turkish army and factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In April 2018, a number of local councils were formed in the district; people with ties to the PYD are excluded from participation in the local administration. It is unknown how transparent and fair the process for the appointment of the council was.<sup>514</sup> A police force set up and trained by Turkey is active in Afrin.<sup>515</sup>

Since January 2014, a Kurdish interim administration has been operating in Kurdish territory with its own ministries, laws, courts and a police force/security service (*Asayish*).<sup>516</sup> In March 2019, the Syrian government threatened to retake the Kurdish region by force unless it submitted to the laws and regulations of the Syrian government. The Kurdish authorities then stated that the government in Damascus was pursuing a policy of oppression and violence.<sup>517</sup> They also stated that they were

<sup>509</sup> Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES).

<sup>510</sup> Chatham House, *Governing Rojava: Layers of legitimacy in Syria*, December 2016. Omran, *The Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria: Questions of Legitimacy and Identity*, 26 July 2018. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>511</sup> See also Chapter 1.1 on the Syrian opposition in exile.

<sup>512</sup> <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-forces-bolster-assad-in-aleppo>.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019. See also Rudaw.net, *Why the Syrian Kurds should be granted autonomy*, 20 January 2019; Anha, *Formation of Autonomous Administration of North, East Syria*, 6 September 2018; Confidential source, 19 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>515</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77637>.

<sup>516</sup> General Official Report on Syria of June 2015. The Kurds have more than 100,000 officials, 60,000 fighters and 30,000 police. Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>517</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78232>; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/will-syrian-kurds-strike-deal-moscow>.

ready for dialogue with the Syrian government, but rejected 'reconciliation agreements'.<sup>518</sup>

Parts of the provinces of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor are part of the federation.<sup>519</sup> Raqqa has been governed by the *Raqqa Civil Council* (RCC) since it was retaken from ISIS in October 2017.<sup>520</sup> In March 2018, a number of important Arabs including Omer Aloush, the founder of the Raqqa Civil Council, were murdered.<sup>521</sup> On 2 November 2018, the influential leader of the al-Huwaidi tribe, Bashir al-Faisal, was murdered. It is not known who the perpetrators are or among which group they should be sought, but it is alleged these murders are the result of increasing Kurdish-Arab tensions.<sup>522</sup>

### 2.1.2 *The security situation*

The fighting against ISIS continued during the reporting period, taking place especially in the border region with Iraq in the province of Deir al-Zor. The *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) were assisted by the international coalition against ISIS by means of air strikes on ISIS targets. According to the SNHR, thousands of civilians were killed in these strikes.<sup>523</sup> The last ISIS bastion in Baghouz fell on 23 March.<sup>524</sup> According to observers, the military defeat does not mean that ISIS has been permanently eliminated as a movement.<sup>525</sup> Remaining ISIS supporters set fire to more than 30,000 hectares of cereal and barley fields in the provinces of Hasaka and Raqqa.<sup>526</sup> In the provinces of Hasaka and Deir al-Zor in the Kurdish region, there were Iraqi and coalition air strikes on ISIS, but no Syrian air strikes. This contrasts with the areas under the control of opposition groups, such as in Idlib and southern Syria, where the Syrian and Russian air forces regularly carry out air strikes.<sup>527</sup>

In north-eastern Syria, the most dangerous area during the reporting period extended from Manbij via Raqqa to Deir al-Zor. Several attacks were carried out in Manbij. In Raqqa, there are still ISIS sleeping cells that carry out attacks and in Deir al-Zor, the area recently captured from ISIS, from Markadah to Busayrah and Kesra and to Al Busayrah, Sha Fah and Hajin, is dangerous because of escaped ISIS fighters carrying out attacks.<sup>528</sup> The head of a local committee in the province of Deir al-Zor was assassinated in an attack on his car. Attacks are officially carried out

<sup>518</sup> AFP, *Syrie: les Kurdes refusent les accords de "réconciliation" du régime*, 3 May 2019. See also ICG, *Middle East Briefing N°66 - Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East*, 21 December 2018.

<sup>519</sup> The YPG operates in predominantly Arab areas with local Kurdish intermediaries with a good understanding of local conditions. The YPG also recruits young Arabs for the SDF through these channels. This works, as it is a way for young people to earn an income. The approach is less successful in Deir al-Zor, where no local Kurdish intermediaries can be found. Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>520</sup> The PYD administration in north-eastern Syria is based in Aina Issa. It is subdivided into seven administrative areas, each with its own local council and a certain degree of autonomy. This is partly based on the composition of the population in the area in question. In the Kurdish region, for example, laws are in force that prohibit polygamy, but in cities like Raqqa with a predominantly Arab population, polygamy is allowed. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>521</sup> ANF, *Member of Raqqa Civil Council assassinated in Raqqa*, 15 March 2018.

<sup>522</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>523</sup> [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Eighteenth\\_report\\_to\\_document\\_violations\\_of\\_international\\_coalition\\_forces\\_in\\_Syria\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Eighteenth_report_to_document_violations_of_international_coalition_forces_in_Syria_en.pdf).

<sup>524</sup> CNN, *ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says*, 23 March 2019.

<sup>525</sup> Combating Terrorism Center, *A Hollow Victory over the Islamic State in Syria? The High Risk of Jihadi Revival in Deir ez-Zor's Euphrates River Valley*, February 2019; Sokirianskaia, Ekaterina. "Russia and ISIS: A New Phase of the Old Conflict?" *Terrorism, Radicalisation & Countering Violent Extremism*. Palgrave Pivot, Singapore, 2019. 101-114.

<sup>526</sup> <https://www.paxvoorvrede.nl/.../humanitarian-appeal-on-crop-fires-in-north-eastern-syria.pdf>.

<sup>527</sup> ISW, *Syria situation report*, 21 February – 6 March 2018.

<sup>528</sup> Netherlands Atlantic Association, *ISIS begint nieuw gewelddadig hoofdstuk*, 29 April 2019. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

by ISIS, but the possibility cannot be excluded that other actors also have an interest in destabilising this area.<sup>529</sup>

A large camp for displaced persons in the province of Raqqa is located in Aina Issa.<sup>530</sup> In April 2019, the Al Hol camp, with a capacity of 20,000, accommodated 60-70,000 displaced persons, families of ISIS fighters and foreign ISIS fighters.<sup>531</sup>

### 2.1.3 *The position of the non-Kurds*

The last census on the composition of the Syrian population dates from 2004. The federation area is predominantly populated by Kurds. However, most of the population in the cities of Manbij and al-Shadadi (Hasaka province) is Arabic. Ethnic and religious minorities have also long lived in the area, such as Christians, Yazidis and Turkmens. In the parts of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor provinces recaptured from ISIS, the majority of the population is also Arabic.<sup>532</sup>

Kurds and Arabs have long had a troubled relationship. Kurds have been discriminated against for years and suppressed by the Syrian government. There is also discontent among the Arab population in the SDF area. Examples of discrimination that are cited are lack of influence on local government, under-representation in the security forces, the Kurdish curriculum in schools and access to the legal system. In May 2019, Arab residents protested against the SDF for several weeks due to lack of basic services, forced recruitment and discrimination in local councils led by Kurds.<sup>533</sup>

Furthermore, facilities in Hasaka are superior to those in Arab cities such as Raqqa. There are many aid organisations in Hasaka and the economic situation is better there than in the Arab areas. The north-east is the cereal- and cotton-growing area of Syria, and there is also a lot of oil in pockets underground. In the Kurdish area, Arabs are constantly afraid of being accused of ties with ISIS. For example, people are not allowed to return to their homes because they have been classified as ISIS homes and need to be investigated. Following the fighting in Baghouz, there were tensions between Kurds and Arabs because many civilians were killed in the attacks. These included ISIS detainees, who may have been foreigners, but also Arabs from Raqqa and Deir al-Zor.<sup>534</sup>

Some of the Arabs support the Kurdish administration, others support the Syrian authorities and a third group supports the opposition to Assad. During the reporting period, despite the attacks mentioned above, in general there were no serious problems between these groups.<sup>535</sup>

In the Kurdish areas outside Hasaka, the Kurds have established local councils on which both Kurds and Arabs sit. The composition of the council reflects the local population in each locality, although Kurds have the final say. Council members are not elected, but appointed by the Kurdish administration. The Kurds have postponed elections so far for security reasons – i.e. ISIS. There is a lack of trust between the population groups.<sup>536</sup>

<sup>529</sup> Neither the Syrian government nor Turkey want the US to remain in this area. In Manbij, Turkey is blamed for attacks, while in Deir al-Zor province the government is often blamed. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>530</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019. See also: HRW, *Syria: Thousands of Displaced Confined to Camps*, 1 August 2018..

<sup>531</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>532</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>533</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-deir-al-zor/anti-kurdish-protests-grow-in-syrias-deir-al-zor-residents-locals-idUSKCN1SE039>.

<sup>534</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>535</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>536</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

During the reporting period, Arab tribes sought a rapprochement with the government in Damascus.<sup>537</sup> The Kurds have made an effort to include Arabs in their system, including by allowing some degree of autonomy, but important decisions are made by Kurds.<sup>538</sup> The checks carried out by the Kurds were mainly confined to Raqqa and the surrounding area. They mainly check for weapons and links with ISIS. In Raqqa, the various police forces are mainly staffed by Arabs. An Arab who is known to work for the SDF administration has no access to the part of Syria controlled by the Syrian government. An Arab who does not work for the SDF and is not wanted by the Syrian government does have such access.<sup>539</sup>

Some of the Christians support the Kurdish government, while others support the Syrian authorities. In September 2018, these groups had a disagreement about education.<sup>540</sup> Thousands of Christians left the country during the occupation by ISIS,<sup>541</sup> but there are still Christians living in SDF territory. Most of them live in the cities of Qamishli, Hasaka and Deriq (its Kurdish name) or Al Malikya. The Christians come from various population groups. Some Christians speak Kurdish and Arabic as well as Armenian or Assyrian.<sup>542</sup> The (security) position of Christians in this area is generally good. Christian combat forces are part of the SDF.<sup>543</sup>

#### 2.1.4 *Legal protection*

The Kurdish administration has its own judicial apparatus with its own courts, but these are not recognised by the Syrian authorities. These courts are prepared to try local Syrian ISIS fighters, but not foreign ISIS fighters.<sup>544</sup> However, they do not have the capacity to imprison thousands of ISIS supporters. For some former ISIS fighters, a reconciliation process has been set up in collaboration with local Arab tribes. In individual cases, the tribes guarantee that an ISIS combatant will not take up arms again.<sup>545</sup> However, there are also ISIS fighters who have gone underground and still carry out attacks.<sup>546</sup> The Kurdish courts also handle civil cases. Opponents of the PYD cannot use these courts on political issues.<sup>547</sup> In Qamishli there is both a court run by the Kurdish authorities and one run by the Syrian authorities.<sup>548</sup> Before 2011, the Syrian government reportedly seized land from Kurds in Hasaka and gave it to Arabs. Since 2012, Kurds have taken back and planted some of this farmland, without having title deeds. In such cases, Arabs do not turn to a Kurdish court.<sup>549</sup> If

<sup>537</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>.

<sup>538</sup> According to a source, people with ties with the PKK make the decisions in every government institution of the PYD. They have organised the resistance against ISIS locally. Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>539</sup> Many Arabs who have ties with the Assad government and are able to pass on this information live in this area. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>540</sup> One group preferred Syrian education, while the other was in favour of Kurdish education. The Kurds tried to close 'regime schools', but this caused tensions with the Christians. A compromise solution was found. Confidential source, 20 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>541</sup> The New York Times, 'There Are No Girls Left': Syria's Christian Villages, 15 August 2018.

<sup>542</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

<sup>544</sup> For many Syrian men (especially the younger ones), joining ISIS was not a step taken for ideological reasons: they had little choice in the circumstances. As well as a modest income, membership of ISIS provided other benefits such as access to medical facilities, which was often an exclusive privilege for ISIS members and their families. Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>545</sup> After the SDF recaptured areas from ISIS, Syrian ISIS members who had not fled or been killed were sometimes allowed to go free. Most of these are said to have been low-ranking or to have played an administrative role. They were handed over to their tribe for rehabilitation and reintegration into their community. Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>546</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>547</sup> Activists from Kurdish opposition parties can be arrested for engaging in political activity without being registered as a party. Kurdish opposition parties refuse to register because they do not recognise the PYD. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>548</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>549</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

Arabs wish to defend their rights, rather than going before a Kurdish court they involve leaders in their tribal network who have good ties with the Kurds.<sup>550</sup>

Civil society in the north-east has a marginal presence. Traditionally there have been virtually no NGOs, and the small organisations that did exist had to stop when ISIS seized power there. Some NGOs have tried to rebuild their organisation under the SDF. Arab tribal leaders and prominent figures play an important role in the region. Their focus is on survival and they have established links with any authority that has been in power for any length of time. For the hierarchical Arab tribes in the north-east, community life within the tribe is important. Solidarity, mutual assistance and charity are particularly in evidence within the tribal network in which family networks play a leading role. Unequal treatment of women is the norm, and honour killings are part of the culture.<sup>551</sup>

Tribes readily switch loyalty to whoever is in power. Tribal leaders consult one another but not the members of the tribe. Tribal members regard their relationship with tribal leaders as a form of protection, and potentially important if they need anything. Alleged Arab opposition members who have been arrested have in some cases been released by the Kurdish authorities under pressure from tribal leaders.<sup>552</sup>

#### 2.1.5 *Travel*

The inhabitants of the areas controlled by Kurds cannot travel in and out completely freely, but can travel freely within their own area. Displaced persons from ISIS-controlled territory have been detained at the borders of the SDF area. The Kurds do not let people through in a northwards direction unless family or friends will act as guarantors. Following bad experiences in the past, they often subject suspected ISIS supporters to a security investigation. The Kurds are said not to have databases of wanted persons.<sup>553</sup> The unofficial Semalka border crossing to the north of Faysh Khabur is used to supply humanitarian aid. Many international NGOs are based in Erbil. The border is also used for the transit of commercial goods and for medical emergencies. Civilians can travel back and forth, but require permission.<sup>554</sup> International coalition troops also use this unofficial border crossing. Syrians coming from Europe use this border crossing, for example to visit family in northern Syria. Syrian Kurds and Arabs who live in the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR) in Iraq also use it. Syrians who want to travel to the KAR can register and then have to wait their turn. It sometimes takes two to three weeks for them to gain permission to cross the border. Passports are not stamped. People are allowed to go to the KAR for a few days to consult a doctor or visit their family. Some students cross the border to take exams, and people sometimes need to attend interviews in embassies and consulates regarding visa applications for family visits or resettlement.<sup>555</sup>

Manbij forms a bridge between the area controlled by Turkey and affiliated groups, the *Euphrates Shield Zone*, and the Kurdish area.<sup>556</sup>

<sup>550</sup> If an Arab has been unlawfully detained, his family may attempt to bribe prison staff. They can also put pressure on the authorities through tribal elders. Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>551</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid. See Syria Call, *Raqqa on a hot tin and Arab tribes boycott SDF*, 4 November 2018.

<sup>553</sup> Many security incidents have occurred in the past. In Kobani, ISIS fighters disguised as civilians entered the city and killed hundreds of people in a single night in 2016. They entered houses and killed people randomly. Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>554</sup> Citizens need permission from the Kurdish authorities on both sides of the border: the PYD on the Syrian side and the KRG on the Iraqi side. Cooperation between the two is good. Confidential source, 28 March 2019. See also Smart News, *Autonomous Administration opens Semalka border crossing following days of closure, Northeastern Syria*, 25 March 2019.

<sup>555</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>556</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

The city of Qamishli is under SDF control, but the airport and some government buildings are under the control of the Syrian government. During the period when the area was completely under government control, the government tried to gain the support of the Kurds and made few arrests.<sup>557</sup>

The elderly and women can move around freely, but this is harder for young men as they are required to do military service. See 2.1.8. Many Kurds have come from Afrin to Hasaka. People from Hasaka who have no problem with the Syrian government have gone to the city of Aleppo.<sup>558</sup>

#### 2.1.6 *Population composition*

The federation territory is inhabited predominantly by Kurds, but also Arabs, Christians, Yazidis and Turkmens.<sup>559</sup> Kurds are said not to have occupied Arabs' houses.<sup>560</sup>

#### 2.1.7 *Migration*

There are no reports of Kurds from other parts of the country, such as Damascus and the city of Aleppo, moving for security reasons to the area controlled by the Kurds, or the federation in particular.<sup>561</sup> Most Arabs who have returned have moved to the outskirts of Raqqqa. The SDF area is easier to access than the area under the control of the Syrian government, because it is easier for Arabs who previously lived in areas controlled by ISIS, HTS or the FSA to achieve reconciliation with the SDF than with the Syrian government. Those who are wanted by the SDF can achieve reconciliation with the SDF, and some Arab opposition members have done this. The situation as regards human rights and freedom of expression is, according to one source, better in the SDF areas than elsewhere. In the SDF areas, as a rule, nobody is tortured to death in detention, although torture does take place on a small scale. The international coalition in the area, which consisted of American, British and French troops at the end of the reporting period, monitors the human rights situation to some extent.<sup>562</sup>

One source reports that young men and highly educated people in particular are going abroad due to compulsory military service and the poor economic situation in the area.<sup>563</sup> This source also states that political opponents of the PYD have mostly left north-eastern Syria and gone to the KAR or (via Iraq or Turkey) travelled on to Europe.<sup>564</sup> Kurdish opponents who are still in north-eastern Syria are not explicitly anti-PYD, but have expressed their discontent with certain procedures by means of demonstrations. The PYD usually clamps down hard on political opposition leaders by arresting them and holding them for months.<sup>565</sup> See also 1.5.

#### 2.1.8 *Compulsory military service*

Since July 2014, there has been compulsory military service<sup>566</sup> in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria for all men between the ages of 18 and 30 living in this

<sup>557</sup> Confidential source, 20 March 2019.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>560</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>561</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/monday-briefing-conflict-far-over-syria>; <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78232> ; ; The Washington Institute for Near East policy: Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, 2018; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: Afrin crisis. Situation report no. 1*, 5 April 2018.

<sup>562</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

<sup>563</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>564</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>565</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>566</sup> Referred to in English-language sources as *mandatory self-defence duty*.

region.<sup>567</sup> Military service used to last six months, but was twelve months during the reporting period. Those who refuse or are arrested are given 15 months of compulsory military service. Afterwards, the conscript is free to join a militia.<sup>568</sup> The conscripts serve in the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*), the armed wing of the PYD. These so-called population protection units protect the external borders and combat ISIS.<sup>569</sup> Women serve in the female protection units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ). They can join voluntarily.<sup>570</sup>

In theory, an only son is exempt from compulsory military service.<sup>571</sup> In addition, if a family has several sons, they do not have to serve simultaneously. Students can defer their military service or spread it out over two years. Men who have served in the Syrian army are still required to perform their military service in the Kurdish areas. It is possible to make a payment to avoid military service.<sup>572</sup>

The YPG is an important component within the SDF, a local force consisting of Kurds, Arabs and minorities, supported by the US.

Arabs have commonly refused to do compulsory military service and gone into hiding in their villages. The SDF has forced men to enlist, for example in Al Karama, a former ISIS stronghold, where it arrested many young men. After negotiations with the Sheikh, the SDF released the young men on condition that they would join the fight against ISIS. When young Arabs join the SDF, it is often to earn income for the family. Joining the YPG/SDF is also a way of gaining protection against acts of revenge by families whose members have been killed by ISIS. The YPG and SDF make considerable efforts to influence these young people ideologically. Other young Arabs flee the area to Iraq or Turkey.<sup>573</sup> Since the end of April 2019, Arabs in the SDF area in Deir al-Zor have protested against the forced recruitment of young people, the thousands of detainees and the sale of 'their oil' by the YPG<sup>574</sup> to the Syrian regime.<sup>575</sup>

<sup>567</sup> It is not known whether men over the age of 30 have to serve.

<sup>568</sup> The monthly income of a conscript is USD 150-200; an official earns USD 80-90 per month. Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>569</sup> Dutch COI report on compulsory military service in Syria, 23 December 2016; Syria direct, *Tribal leaders halt conscription policy by Kurdish-led forces in Manbij, Tabqa*, 8 November 2017.

<sup>570</sup> Telesur, *Kurdish women turning Kobani into a living 'hell' for Islamic State*, 14 October 2014; The Independent, *Female Kurdish fighters announce new training academies for Arab women to take on Isis in Syria*, 4 January 2017.

<sup>571</sup> It is not known whether an only son is exempt in all cases in practice.

<sup>572</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019. See also the Dutch COI report on compulsory military service in Syria, 23 December 2016.

<sup>573</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>574</sup> The YPG controls 80% of the oil reserves in Syria, some of which lie in the 'Arab' area.

<sup>575</sup> The Intercept, *In Syria, U.S.-Backed Kurdish Fighters Face Trump's Withdrawal — and the Legacy of Their Own Mistakes*, 28 December 2018.

## 3 Military aspects

### 3.1.1 Military service<sup>576</sup>

In Syria, military service is compulsory for men between the ages of 18 and 42 years. As described in 2.3, the Kurdish autonomous administration has organised its own military service in its local armed forces in federation territory since 2014. This section describes the situation in the area under the control of the Syrian government.

Conscription applies to all men regardless of provenance, background or religion. However, if a son is the only man in a family, he is exempt from compulsory military service. This also applies if the son was born abroad. Conscription has officially applied for the army and the security services since 2017. It is also found in militias, including private militias, Shiite militias and Hezbollah. Together, the militias constitute the *national defence forces*, with more than 100,000 men. In terms of size, these units are equal to the Syrian army.<sup>577</sup>

Due to the ongoing armed conflict, the terms and conditions of military service are not strictly adhered to.<sup>578</sup> Thus various deferral options cannot be invoked or can only be used to a limited extent, for example on the basis of studies or on medical grounds.<sup>579</sup> In theory it is possible to buy off military service.<sup>580</sup> For Syrians living abroad it can cost between USD 3,000 and 5,000 to buy off conscription, not including bribes.<sup>581</sup> Syrians sometimes pay a bribe in order to obtain a deferral of compulsory military service, but are subsequently called up.<sup>582</sup> According to one source, those who have been called up sometimes mutilate themselves to avoid having to go into the army.<sup>583</sup>

The length of time that a recruit must serve is said often to be open-ended. In peacetime it is 24 months, and for students 18 months. Those subject to military service remain so in wartime and after a state of emergency has been declared for the duration of the relevant period.<sup>584</sup> Conscripts' period of compulsory service is

<sup>576</sup> For a comprehensive overview, refer to the Dutch COI report on compulsory military service in Syria of December 2016.

<sup>577</sup> Russia wants to integrate militias into the Syrian army; Iran wants to keep them outside the army, which will allow it to maintain a grip on them. Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>578</sup> Since 2015 it has been possible to obtain a deferral of military service on the grounds of needing to support parents. It is unclear whether this rule is applied in practice. Those who have money can arrange a deferral by paying bribes to the Syrian authorities. Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>579</sup> As long as they are studying at university, students can defer until the age of 27. Students therefore take a long time to complete their studies and arrange a passport shortly before graduating. They then go abroad immediately after graduation. This rule has not been changed so far. Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>580</sup> Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007 contains the provisions regarding deferral of military service. In August 2014, President Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 33 of 2014, amending a number of articles of Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007. In January 2017, President Assad issued Law No. 3 of 2017, which amended Articles 48 and 49 of Legislative Decree No. 30 of 2007. SANA, *President al-Assad issues legislative decree amending mandatory military service law*, 6 August 2014; IRBC, *Syria: Changes to legal exemptions from compulsory military service, including implementation (January-July 2017)*, 18 September 2017.

<sup>581</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>582</sup> Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>583</sup> However, according to this source, after receiving treatment in hospital they are imprisoned for tarnishing the national honour. Soldiers are prioritised at checkpoints and in bread distributions, but can easily end up in prison if they make a mistake. Confidential source, 18 March 2019.

<sup>584</sup> CBS, *Syria's Assad repeals emergency law*, 25 February 2015.



therefore constantly being extended.<sup>585</sup> In addition to conscripts, reservists are called up until the age of 40.<sup>586</sup> See also 3.1.3.

#### *Former opposition areas*

Men left behind in areas that have been handed over to government control after negotiations are still required to perform compulsory military service. They are given six months to arrange their military service. In areas retaken by the Syrian regime, men have been arrested and drafted into the army.<sup>587</sup> For example, 7,000 men were stopped and drafted into the army in eastern Ghouta. Performing compulsory military service is seen by the Syrian authorities as a sign of loyalty.<sup>588</sup> There has also been voluntary recruitment of men in opposition areas recaptured by the Syrian authorities. In Dara'a province, some former rebels joined the Fifth Syrian Army Corps in order to fight ISIS.<sup>589</sup>

For men between the ages of 18 and 40 in Syria, it is difficult to escape being drafted into the army or armed units. In some areas in Syria, the army or armed groups have no interest in forcibly conscripting young people. The areas where men are most likely to be drafted are those recaptured by the Syrian government in 2018, such as the province of Dara'a and the areas around Damascus.<sup>590</sup>

New conscripts are important to the Syrian authorities from a military viewpoint, as a way of replenishing the ranks and relieving volunteers and conscripts who have had to fight or been at the front for a long time. Only people with money can prevent their son from being drafted and/or sent to the front.<sup>591</sup>

#### *Alawites*

At the start of the war many Alawites signed up for military service. Due to heavy losses, young Alawites are now in hiding. The police do not actively try to track them down, to prevent an uprising of Alawites. Alawites have also called for non-Alawites from former rebel areas to be sent to the front, following heavy losses among Alawites during the government offensive in the province of Idlib in April-May 2019.<sup>592</sup>

#### *Druze*

Many Druze went into hiding at the start of the war. The Syrian regime has made agreements with leaders from this community. The Druze do military service in 'self-protection units'. Since mid-2018 there has been pressure from the government for Druze to be drafted into the government army. In 2018, ISIS attacked Al-Badia, the desert area to the east of Al-Suweida, and Druze villages. The army had to

<sup>585</sup> Atlantic Council, *Forced Conscription Continues Despite Amnesty by Syrian Government* by Hossam El-Jablawi, 13 February 2019; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/forced-conscription-continues-despite-amnesty-by-syrian-government>.

<sup>586</sup> Dutch COI report on compulsory military service in Syria, 23 December 2016; Danish Refugee Council and Danish Immigration Service, *Syria. Recruitment practices in government-controlled areas and in areas under opposition control, involvement of public servants and civilians in the armed conflict and issues related to exiting Syria*, August 2017; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>587</sup> Many men hide in their homes in these areas.

<sup>588</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*, 2018; Confidential source, 17 June 2019; The Syrian Observer, *Assad Army Launches Conscription Campaign in Eastern Ghouta*, 2 April 2019.

<sup>589</sup> Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters* by Haid Haid, July 2018; SOHR, *Mass executions carried out by the regime forces and the 'reconciliation factions' in Yarmouk basin*, 31 August 2018; ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019. See also the Dutch COI report of June 2018.

<sup>590</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>591</sup> Confidential source, 26 March 2019; Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>592</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

intervene and liberate hostages, and demanded something in return from the Druze.<sup>593</sup> See also 1.4 ISIS attacks on Druze villages in Al-Sweida.

#### *Palestinians*

Palestinians perform their military service in special units that fall under Palestinian authority and support the Syrian regime. According to one source, Palestinians have the least chance of avoiding conscription.<sup>594</sup>

#### *Idlib*

There was no compulsory military service in Idlib during the reporting period. However, HTS put a lot of pressure on families to have their sons join HTS. The economic situation and associated poverty prompted young people to join HTS. Without much training, these young people were sent into combat, resulting in high casualty totals. This in turn led to protests from the population. Some young people try to reach Afrin and then make their way to the border with Turkey.<sup>595</sup>

#### *Repatriation*

If a man returns to Syria and performs his military service, any charges against him are dropped.<sup>596</sup>

### 3.1.2 *Forced recruitment and recruitment of children*

#### *Forced recruitment*<sup>597</sup>

The Iranian-led militias use foreign troops.<sup>598</sup> Recruitment takes place outside Syria and is therefore not described in this report.

Opposition groups and the Kurdish combat groups mainly recruit fighters on a voluntary basis.<sup>599</sup> It is not known to what extent opposition groups use forced recruitment to supplement their numbers. Due to the large number of opposition groups that have entered into various alliances over time, it is not possible to give a general picture of recruitment methods, forcible or otherwise. As well as coercion by the group in question, a civilian can above all experience social or financial pressure to join an armed group. Various sources reported that thousands of Syrians who joined ISIS did so not for ideological reasons, but because they were motivated by the additional benefits such as income and access to medical services.<sup>600</sup>

It is known that the *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) and YPG use forced recruitment in addition to the conscription system in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria for men between the ages of 18 and 30 in order to supplement their numbers. An increase in forced recruitment by the YPG/SDF was observed at the time of the Turkish offensive in the Afrin district. Elsewhere, the population rose up in protest

<sup>593</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019. See also The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*, 2018.

<sup>594</sup> It is not known why Palestinians have the least chance of avoiding conscription. Confidential source, 17 June 2019. See also The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*, 2018.

<sup>595</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019. See also The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*, 2018.

<sup>596</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019.

<sup>597</sup> Although there are conscripts serving against their will, this is not regarded as forced recruitment, but as forced conscription, since conscription is a legally established duty for men in Syria. See section 3.1 of this official report.

<sup>598</sup> See The National Interest, *Iran Relies on Foreign Militias and Young Shia Muslims to Fight Its War in Syria*, 31 October 2019; Clingendael, *Six scenarios for pro-regime militias in 'post-war' Syria*, March 2019. <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>;

<sup>599</sup> The proportions of conscripts and volunteers within the Kurdish combat groups are unknown.

<sup>600</sup> Danish Refugee Council and Danish Immigration Service, *Syria. Recruitment practices in government-controlled areas and in areas under opposition control, involvement of public servants and civilians in the armed conflict and issues related to exiting Syria*, August 2017. Confidential source, 19 April 2018.

against announcements about the introduction of conscription in Kurdish territory recaptured from ISIS.<sup>601</sup>

#### *Recruitment of children*

All parties in the conflict recruit children to varying degrees.<sup>602</sup>

Both the Syrian armed forces (the army and the *National Defence Forces*) and pro-government militias recruit children. Boys of 16 or 17 have been picked at checkpoints and drafted.<sup>603</sup> Armed opposition groups such as *Ahrar al-Sham*, *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* and FSA factions also recruit children, including some under the age of 15. They have been used for support tasks, but also for combat positions.<sup>604</sup>

The Kurdish YPG and the *Asayish* security service also recruited children in areas they controlled. In 2017, the number of verified cases of child recruitment by the YPG and *Asayish* increased fivefold. As a result, they were responsible for the highest child recruitment totals in 2017. Both boys and girls were recruited, and both Kurdish and Arab children. Children were used by the YPG both in armed roles and for unarmed tasks.<sup>605</sup>

Overall, ISIS is responsible for the largest number of child recruitments. Children have been deployed on front lines and in places that could be targeted by air strikes. Cases are known of these child soldiers being killed in battle.<sup>606</sup>

### 3.1.3

#### *Amnesty arrangements*

On 9 October 2018, President Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 18 in which he declared a general amnesty for military deserters at home and abroad and for those who had committed the offences described in the Military Criminal Law, Legislative Decree No. 61 from 1950 and the amendments thereto of offences committed prior to 9 October 2018.<sup>607</sup> Anyone who had evaded conscription could report to the authorities within four months in Syria or within six months if they were outside Syria. For those outside Syria, the decree ran until 9 April 2019. Those who came forward were not penalised. Few did so.<sup>608</sup> In addition, a Ministry of Defence circular

<sup>601</sup> PAX and The Syrian Institute, *Siege Watch. Eighth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria. August – October 2017*; UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, 1 February 2018; Confidential source, 19 April 2018.

<sup>602</sup> UNSC, *A/72/865-S/2018/465*, 16 May 2018. UN Children and Armed Conflict, *Violence in Northwest Syria Raises Grave Protection Concerns for Children*, 19 May 2019. See also: The Borgen Project, *Child soldiers in Syria*, 26 June 2018.

<sup>603</sup> Danish Refugee Council and Danish Immigration Service, *Syria. Recruitment practices in government-controlled areas and in areas under opposition control, involvement of public servants and civilians in the armed conflict and issues related to exiting Syria*, August 2017; UNHCR, *International protection considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic. Update V*, November 2017. UN Human Rights Council, *Annual report of the special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict*, 8 January 2018; United Nations University, *Cradled by conflict*, February 2018; Confidential source, 16 April 2018.

<sup>604</sup> UNHCR, *International protection considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic. Update V*, November 2017; Confidential source, 16 April 2018.

<sup>605</sup> UNHCR, *International protection considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic. Update V*, November 2017. HRW, *Syria: Armed Group Recruiting Children in Camps*, 3 August 2018. HRW, *Key Steps Taken to End Use of Child Soldiers in Syria*, 11 September 2018.

<sup>606</sup> OCHA, *Syria crisis: North East Syria. Situation report no. 14 (1 – 15 August 2017)*; UNHCR, *International protection considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic. Update V*, November 2017; Confidential source, 16 April 2018.

<sup>607</sup> Articles 100 and 101 of Legislative Decree No. 18 make evasion of compulsory military service and desertion criminal offences. TIMEP, *Brief: Legislative Decree No. 18: Military Service Amnesty*, 6 December 2018.

<sup>608</sup> However, deserters and opposition fighters had to declare 'I promise not to fight against you any more'. SANA, *Presidential decree granting general amnesty for military deserters inside and outside country*, 9 October 2018; Confidential source, 25 March 2019; Confidential source, 26 March 2019.

on military service for reservists was issued on 28 October 2018. This stated that 800,000 registered reservists would not be called up.<sup>609</sup>

### 3.2 Command structure of army and militias

The *Syrian Arab Army* (SAA) is the army led by Assad. Its structure and cohesion have been affected by the long-lasting struggle. The army has decreased in size. Although the quality of the troops is low, discipline and accountability to the direct commander are apparently still present. Groups quartered locally have gained more autonomy, because the struggle takes place on different fronts. The elite forces, under the authority of Maher Assad, the president's brother, are the Syrian authorities' most important forces. They include special forces such as the *Hawk Forces*. The *Tiger Forces*, a special elite group of the *Airforce Intelligence Directorate*, is led by Suheil el-Hassan and supported by Russia. Since 2015, they have been deployed in every offensive by the regime to recapture opposition areas.<sup>610</sup> Developments are in progress to reinforce the national army, for example by bringing the various pro-government militias into the army.<sup>611</sup> Women also serve in the SAA.<sup>612</sup>

There are various militias fighting on the side of the Syrian authorities. Their number and diversity make it impossible to provide a general description of the control structure of the militias. Pro-government militias cooperate with the Syrian army, although there may be some exceptions to this.

A number of militias are Iranian and are led by commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.<sup>613</sup>

According to one source, incidents are known to have occurred in which militias were controlled by the Syrian government and cases in which they fought against each other: Russian-allied forces against Iran and its allies. The Russians have tried to embed opposition groups in an army structure in the south, in an effort to find a solution to the conflict. As this has proved difficult, they have also tried to keep opposition groups intact and to exercise control over them. The fifth Syrian army corps is pro-Russian.<sup>614</sup> The fourth division is pro-Iranian. Regular units of the national army have been deployed on an ad hoc basis in conflicts, as has

<sup>609</sup> It is not known whether there are other registered reservists in addition to the 800,000 mentioned in the circular. It is also unclear to which groups / profiles / annual cohorts the 800,000 reservists belong. According to the *Syrian Law Journal*, the 28 October 2018 circular prohibits the arrest of those who have ignored the call-up of reservists, and the names of those who have been called up have been deleted from the lists of the Ministry of Defence. Reservists wishing to return to Syria from abroad must first regularise their status with the Syrian diplomatic representation in their country of residence. See 4.4.3. The National, *Syrian military clears men wanted for extra military service*, 31 October 2018; Xinhua, *Syrian army ends calls for reserve military personnel: newspaper*, 29 October 2018; Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>610</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/publications/tiger-forces-pro-assad-fighters-backed-russia>.

<sup>611</sup> Danish Refugee Council and Danish Immigration Service, *Syria. Recruitment practices in government-controlled areas and in areas under opposition control, involvement of public servants and civilians in the armed conflict and issues related to exiting Syria*, August 2017; Confidential source, 1 December 2017; Confidential source, 18 April 2018.

<sup>612</sup> As the civil war has dragged on and more casualties have fallen among the conscripts, women have been called upon to volunteer. It is not known how many women have been deployed since such calls were first made, or how much pay they receive. The Republican Guard has formed a special unit of women. As far as is known, this is not a permanent structure. Daily Mail, *Syria's female tank drivers: Battalion of 800 women commandos in fierce clashes with rebels on the front-line in Damascus*, 25 March 2015; The Telegraph, *Syrian conflict: Bashar al-Assad's female fighters, in pictures*, 31 May 2019.

<sup>613</sup> ACLED, *Pro-government militia autonomy on the battlefield in Syria*, 22 March 2018. See also section 3.3 of this report.

<sup>614</sup> AMN, *Tiger Forces undergo rigorous training under the watch of the Russian military*, 13 April 2019.

Hezbollah.<sup>615</sup> According to members of the opposition in southern Syria, Iran and Hezbollah have extended their influence in the south following the Syrian army's recapture of the area. They have recruited fighters from the local population, set up a base in the north-east of the province of Dara'a and brought fighters into the fourth division of the army. Allegedly, Hezbollah offered higher pay than the pro-Russian fifth army corps, protection against Syrian security services and a guarantee not to be sent to another front in Syria.<sup>616</sup>

### 3.2.1 *The functioning and control of the YPG and SDF*

The YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel: People's Protection Units*) is the armed wing of the Kurdish party PYD. The women's division is called *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê* (YPJ, *Women's Defence Units*). The YPG/YPJ functions as the army of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the region under the de facto control of the PYD. As well as guarding the boundaries of this territory, the YPG has also played a major role in the fight against ISIS. The YPG is also referred to as a Kurdish militia. The number of fighters in the YPG and YPJ together is estimated at between 20,000 and 30,000.<sup>617</sup>

The SDF is a force fighting against ISIS in north-eastern Syria with the support of the United States. It is an alliance of various existing military groups from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Effective leadership is in the hands of the YPG members. The SDF does not have a traditional army structure, but does have a military command hierarchy by means of commanders. The total number of combatants belonging to the SDF was estimated at 50,000 in 2018.<sup>618</sup>

### 3.2.2 *The functioning and control of the Free Syrian Army*

The *Free Syrian Army* is not a single coherent armed group, as the word 'army' suggests, but an alliance of various armed secular or moderate Islamic opposition groups. The different groups are also referred to as brigades or battalions, using army terminology. In an attempt to enhance the command structure between the different groups, a military council was set up in 2012, but it was dissolved in 2014. In 2017, the FSA in the south splintered further following pressure from ISIS, pro-Iranian and pro-Russian militias and the decrease in foreign aid.<sup>619</sup>

In the north, dozens of FSA factions are united in a *National Army* under the *Syrian Interim Government*.<sup>620</sup> In southern Syria, various factions worked together in a coalition called the *Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army*.<sup>621</sup> Since the Syrian army's reconquest of the south, only a few factions have remained active in this area, in the province of Dara'a.

<sup>615</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *Hezbollah in Syria* by Marissa Sullivan, April 2014. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/hezbollah-syria>.

<sup>616</sup> ETANA, *Hezbollah's strategy in south Syria*, 10 December 2018; ETANA, *Nature of Hezbollah's presence in south Syria*, 15 January 2019; ICG, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South - Middle East Report N°196*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>617</sup> Chatham House, *Governing Rojava: Layers of legitimacy in Syria*, December 2016; Global Security, *Kurdish People's Protection Unit YPG* <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm> (last updated 18 January 2018, consulted 7 June 2019); Omran for strategic studies, *Military and security structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria*, 23 January 2018.

<sup>618</sup> Omran for strategic studies, *Military and security structures of the Autonomous Administration in Syria*, 23 January 2018; The New York Times, *Amid Turkish assault, Kurdish forces drawn away from U.S. fight with ISIS*, 28 February 2018.

<sup>619</sup> Geneva Academy, *The War Report 2018, The Syrian armed conflict: nearing the end?* By Marija Sulce, January 2019. <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/The%20Syrian%20Armed%20Conflict%20Nearing%20The%20End.pdf>.

<sup>620</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, *A Quagmire in the Making?* By Mohanad Hage Ali, 15 May 2019. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79129>.

<sup>621</sup> Bellingcat, *Factions fighting in the Syrian Civil War*, 29 April 2017. Given the date, the source's overviews of the northern and southern FSA factions may be obsolete and no longer accurate.

### 3.3 Foreign forces

This section describes the largest and/or most important foreign forces involved in any way in the conflict in Syria.

#### *Turkey*

In 2016, Turkey deployed its army in *Operation Euphrates Shield*. This operation was, it said, aimed at combating terrorism on the border with Turkey. Given the Turkish forces' position, this meant that they were fighting both ISIS and Kurdish battle groups. In 2017, the operation was declared to have been completed by President Erdogan, with Turkey having gained control of a strip of land in northern Syria. However, at the beginning of 2018 a new operation was started under the name Olive Branch. In March 2018, the district of Afrin was captured from the Kurdish YPG by FSA forces led and supported by the Turkish army. In view of their common interests, Turkish troops in northern Syria cooperated with the fighters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>622</sup> According to reports in the press that are hard to verify, Turkey sent reinforcements to the Syrian border several times during the reporting period.<sup>623</sup>

On the basis of the Astana agreements, Turkish troops set up 12 observation posts in the de-escalation zone in Idlib and the surrounding area, with the aim of maintaining and monitoring the de-escalation agreement.<sup>624</sup>

#### *Purchase of S-400*

At the end of the reporting period, the relationship between Turkey and the US, already strained by US support for the Syrian Kurds, came under further pressure due to Turkish plans to purchase the Russian S-400 air defence system. According to the Americans, this represents a threat to the F-35, a fighter jet used by NATO, of which Turkey is a member.<sup>625</sup>

#### *Iran and Russia*

The Syrian authorities received support and military assistance from Iran and Russia. As well as ground troops, Russia also provided air support.<sup>626</sup> Iran operated from various bases in the country. Thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guards troops and an estimated 20,000 foreign militia members<sup>627</sup> were an indispensable addition to the Syrian authorities' forces.<sup>628</sup> There are claims (which are hard to verify) that skirmishes occurred between pro-Russian and pro-Iranian units during the reporting period.<sup>629</sup>

<sup>622</sup> Small War Journal, *Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield: An Exemplar of Joint Combined Arms Maneuver*, by Jeff Jager, 17 October 2016.

<sup>623</sup> Aljazeera, *Turkey sends reinforcements to Syrian border*, 23 December 2018.

<sup>624</sup> ISW, *Syria situation report*, 7 – 21 February 2018; Reuters, *Turkish military sets up sixth observation point in Syria's Idlib*, 15 February 2018; Confidential source, 16 May 2018.

<sup>625</sup> RFE/RL, *Turkey Says Not Giving Up On Russian Missile Deal Despite U.S. Pressure*, 8 April 2019; De Volkskrant, *Ruzie VS-Turkije over aankoop Russisch verdedigingswapen escaleert: Turkse F-35-piloten mogen VS niet meer in*, 7 June 2019.

<sup>626</sup> Jane's, *Russia learns military lessons in Syria*, 2017. The Economist, *Russia's military gamble in Syria is paying off handsomely*, 16 May 2019.

<sup>627</sup> Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and (mostly) Shiite Afghan militias.

<sup>628</sup> ISW, *Iran's Assad regime*, 8 March 2017; Danish Refugee Council en Danish Immigration Service, *Syria. Recruitment practices in government-controlled areas and in areas under opposition control, involvement of public servants and civilians in the armed conflict and issues related to exiting Syria*, August 2017; FRS Stratégie, *Iran's Rising Strategic Foothold in Syria*, January 2018.

<sup>629</sup> MEM, *11 dead in Syria clashes between Russia troops and pro-Iran militias*, 16 April 2019.

Troops from the Lebanese organisation *Hezbollah* are mainly present in the west and south-west of the country. As allies of the Syrian authorities, they practically hold power there. The area is an important supply route for weapons, including those supplied to Lebanon by Iran.<sup>630</sup>

#### *Israel*

During the reporting period, the Israeli army carried out attacks on military targets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and *Hezbollah* in Syria. During the battle for the south in July 2018, the number of Israeli air strikes on 'Iranian' targets in Syria increased rapidly, with seven separate attacks on front line targets extending as far as Deir al-Zor in the east and Aleppo in the north. The Israeli air force shot down a Syrian aircraft on 24 July 2018.<sup>631</sup> On 18 September 2018, the shooting down of a Russian reconnaissance aircraft by Syrian anti-aircraft guns led to tensions between Russia and Israel.<sup>632</sup>

#### *The anti-ISIS coalition*

Under the leadership of the United States of America, a coalition of dozens of countries fought ISIS in Operation *Inherent Resolve*. From 2014 to 2018, the Netherlands was involved as part of this coalition in the fight against ISIS over eastern Syria and in Iraq. For more details, see the Letter to Parliament of 14 January 2019 (Parliamentary document 27 925 no. 647) and the progress report of 18 April 2019 on the Dutch contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition and the broader security deployment in Iraq in 2019.<sup>633</sup> On 19 December 2018, President Trump announced that ISIS had been defeated in Syria and that the US would withdraw all ground forces (2,000 troops).<sup>634</sup> Later, the US decided to keep at least 200 troops on Syrian territory for the time being.<sup>635</sup> Plans to withdraw, maintain, or even expand forces succeeded one another as concerns about a resurgence of ISIS increased. At the end of the reporting period there were about 1,000 US soldiers in Syria.<sup>636</sup>

<sup>630</sup> Carnegie Middle East Centre, *Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship*, 29 March 2019.

<sup>631</sup> Oxford Analytica, *Damascus's return to the south may feed future tension*, 21 August 2018.

<sup>632</sup> Haaretz.com, *Israel Launches Series of Strikes on Targets Near Syria's Latakia*, 18 September 2018. Oxford Analytica, *Plane downing will test Russia's warm ties with Israel*, 18 September 2018.

<sup>633</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-27925-647.html>.

<sup>634</sup> <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1075397797929775105>; Oxford Analytica, *US Syria troop pull-out implies many risks*, 20 December 2018.

<sup>635</sup> BBC News, *Syria war: US to leave 200 troops for peacekeeping after withdrawal*, 22 February 2019. See also Eurasia Review, *The Current Situation Of US Forces In Iraq And Syria – Analysis*, 2 April 2019.

<sup>636</sup> The Defense Post, *US denies plans to leave 1,000 troops in Syria*, 18 March 2019; VOA, *US Troop Levels in Syria 'Quite a Bit Lower' with Help on the Way*, 31 May 2019.

## 4 Displaced persons

More than six million Syrians have been displaced within Syrian borders. There are displaced persons in all 14 Syrian provinces, but most were in the province of Idlib in May 2019. It is common for people to have to flee to another area several times, because fighting has also broken out or flared up in the area to which they have initially escaped. Displaced persons not living in official camps find shelter with family, rent accommodation or stay in informal tent camps or in the open air. The harsh living conditions there mean that staying in a camp tends to be seen as a last resort. Because they are often unable to return to their homes for many years, displaced persons who initially avoided the camps often end up there eventually, for example because they can no longer afford rent or have been evicted from their temporary accommodation for some other reason.<sup>637</sup>

### *North-western Syria*

The situation for displaced persons can differ according to the province and depends on a number of factors, including the level of violence in the area, who holds power and the degree of access to basic services. In the part of Idlib province controlled by opposition groups, there are more IDPs than original inhabitants. A large number of these are displaced within their own province. The IDPs put great pressure on the host communities, so it is not just the displaced themselves who are in need of help. A relatively high proportion of displaced persons in this province – around 25% – live in camps. There are camps that hold four times more people than the established available capacity. The part of Idlib province controlled by the various armed groups has experienced air strikes from Russia and a ground offensive by the Syrian army. Displaced persons are among the civilian casualties caused by these air strikes, which also create new flows of IDPs, both inside and outside Idlib province.<sup>638</sup>

The outbreak of violence between Assad's forces and allies and other armed groups in the north of Hama province and southern Idlib led to an increase in the number of displaced persons during the reporting period. In the period between 29 April and 9 May 2019, 180,000 people were forced from their homes. Around 3 million people live in Idlib's de-escalation zone, including some 1.3 million IDPs. Around 164,000 people fled to the north and east of Idlib province, and around 16,000 people fled to the north and west of Aleppo province. OCHA regards the impact of this increase in the conflict on the civilian population, civilian infrastructure and provision of basic services as a matter of great concern. Some organisations have suspended activities because their buildings have been damaged or destroyed or become unsafe due to the violence. Others have suspended activities for reasons of staff safety or because the population to whom they provided assistance has left. Five humanitarian aid workers are reported to have been killed in air strikes and shelling.<sup>639</sup>

The continued flows of displaced persons in and towards Idlib province have led to a deterioration in the situation there for both IDPs and host communities. Among other things, overcrowding gives rise to mutual tensions and an increase in sexual violence.<sup>640</sup> Palestinians from Yarmouk, Khan Eshieh and South Damascus are

<sup>637</sup> Reach, *Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS): Northwest Syria, October 2018*, 31 October 2018.

<sup>638</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic. Situation report 1: Recent developments in North-western Syria*, 9 May 2019.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> UNFPA, *Voices from Syria 2018*, November 2017.



among the displaced in Idlib. They demanded that the Turkish border be opened for them.<sup>641</sup>

#### 4.1 IDP camps

There are formal and informal camps and there are also many geographical differences. The displaced are very dependent on food distributions, as they are unable to provide for themselves. It is difficult to lead a dignified existence. Serious medical cases are a particular challenge. Other factors are lack of access to income and the poor state of the economy.<sup>642</sup>

##### *North-western Syria*

At the end of 2018, an estimated 1.9 million displaced persons were living in opposition areas in Idlib province, western Aleppo province, northern Hama province and eastern Latakia province. Of these, 417,501 were staying in 336 formal and informal camps (such as factories and schools) at that point.<sup>643</sup> IDP camps were also located in the other areas of the north-west.<sup>644</sup> The largest camp is Atmeh, a cluster of tent camps near the Turkish-Syrian border crossing at Bab al-Hawa. On 31 March 2019, Atmeh still had 75,695 occupants.<sup>645</sup> In April 2019, the bombing in Idlib increased again and the camp population in Atmeh was quickly swelled by hundreds of thousands of new displaced persons.<sup>646</sup>

##### *Southern Syria*

In southern Syria, many Syrians have been displaced for years. Because of the ongoing situation, living conditions have deteriorated for many. Among other problems, people were at risk of being thrown out of rental properties and sought shelter in vacant buildings or mosques. Many see a stay in a formal or informal IDP camp as a last resort.<sup>647</sup>

##### *Rukban*

On the border with Jordan, in a very remote area, is a large camp known as Rukban or 'The Berm'. At the end of 2017, the IDPs who were staying at the nearby camp near Hadalat were transferred to Rukban for security reasons. The camp is run by a number of armed groups.<sup>648</sup> Conditions there are tough. Because the camp is in the desert, it is very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Humanitarian assistance from Jordan occasionally reaches the camp. There are approximately 50,000 people in Rukban; this number is stable, with hardly anyone either leaving or arriving. The camp's occupants are unable to go to Jordan, since that country closed its border with Syria in June 2016. Due to the camp's very remote location, it is

<sup>641</sup> UNRWA is not present in Idlib. AGPS, *Displaced Palestinians in Idlib Push for Unblocking Syria-Turkey Borders*, 1 June 2019.

<sup>642</sup> Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>643</sup> UNHCR, *Cross-Border Humanitarian Response Fact Sheet - Northwest Syria - December 2018*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>644</sup> There are between several hundred and several thousand people in each of these camps. Camps and settlements include Duyuf Al Sharqia, Al Bab Transit/Reception Centre, Azaz Transit/Reception Centre, Tadamun, Al Rahmah (Salama), Bab Al Salame, Sujjo, Yazibag, Al Hameen, Al Rayan (Azaz), Al Resalah (Al Armuda), Bab Al Iman, Bab Al Noor, Shamarin, Tal Jubeen, Talil Elsham school, Talil Elsham Southern, Al Zeytoun (Al Helal), Dostluk (Friendship Camp), Elbil 1, Ekkdeh, Camp 5, Jarablus (Stadium), Jarablus 4 (Jbel), Ra'a, Atareb Carpet factory, Atareb Industrial Secondary. For an overview of all camps and the composition of the population, which fluctuates as a result of the changing security situation, see [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/201903\\_CCCM-Cluster\\_-ISIMM\\_Mar\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/201903_CCCM-Cluster_-ISIMM_Mar_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>645</sup> UNHCR, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Sites Integrated Monitoring Matrix (ISIMM)*, March 2019, 31 March 2019.

<sup>646</sup> Al Jazeera, *Idlib: Surviving under the olive groves of Atmeh*, 11 June 2019.

<sup>647</sup> Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>648</sup> These include Maghawir al-Thawra and ISIS fighters who have gone into hiding. Al Jazeera, *Syria's war: Who is responsible for the dying children of Rukban?*, 18 January 2019.

impossible for people to leave to travel to another part of Syria on their own. To do so would require a guide with an SUV, and as most residents have been in the camp (or previously in Hadalat) for years, they lack the financial means to pay for such a trip.<sup>649</sup>

At the end of the reporting period, there were still 40,000 to 50,000 displaced persons in Rukban. They were not using the corridors that the Russians had set up to enable them to return to their places of origin, such as Hama, Homs, Palmyra or Deir al-Zor.<sup>650</sup> Negotiations between Russia and Syria on the one hand and the US on the other did not initially yield a solution for the difficult situation of the residents of Rukban camp.<sup>651</sup> In April 2019, a few dozen residents of the camp were transferred to the government area in Homs province.<sup>652</sup> Around 20 May 2019, according to the UN, at least 12,000 people from Rukban left for temporary reception centres in Hama and Homs. The return is voluntary for part of the population and is not facilitated by the UN. The costs of transport to the reception centres are high; it is expected that the wealthiest will be the first to leave Rukban camp. The UN has limited access to the reception centres, where conditions are said to meet standards. However, the UN is unable to monitor returnees any further.<sup>653</sup>

#### *North-eastern Syria*

Camps under the control of the *Syrian Democratic Forces* in the Kurdish region severely restricted the freedom of movement of displaced persons. Sources use the words 'internment' or 'prison' to indicate the degree of restriction. Camp residents were not free to come and go. The fact that identity documents were sometimes taken on arrival at the camp also restricted people's freedom of movement.<sup>654</sup>

## **4.2 Camps for ISIS fighters**

### *Al Hol*

In the Al Hol camp in the north-east of Syria, in a separate and heavily guarded section called 'the annex', the families of foreign ISIS fighters are kept behind fences and rolls of barbed wire. They include Dutch nationals with their children. The other 63,500 IDPs and refugees in the camp are also heavily guarded. Some previously supported ISIS, and still do today.<sup>655</sup>

<sup>649</sup> Al Jazeera, *Syria's war: Who is responsible for the dying children of Rukban?*, 18 January 2019.

<sup>650</sup> According to a UN study, 90% of the civilian population wish to return to their places of origin, yet nobody has left the camp to use the corridors. The Russians have accused the US of preventing people from moving. At the same time, some militia leaders in control of the area have said that the findings of the UN investigation were false, and had been made by the Red Crescent to ensure people would say they wished to return. So far it is unclear whether they wish to return, and if not, why not. Confidential source, 27 March 2019; Aljazeera, *UN discuss evacuation of Syrian refugees trapped at Rukban camp*, 28 March 2019.

<sup>651</sup> Confidential source, 10 April 2019.

<sup>652</sup> Xinhua, *More civilians leave rebel-held Rukban camp in Syria*, 29 April 2019.

<sup>653</sup> Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock - *Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria*, 25 June 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief>.

<sup>654</sup> Large camps in the north-east are located at Areesheh, Ein Issa, Roj, Mabruka, Twahina and Al Hol, among other places. For information about these and other camps, see the Reach Initiative reports: Reach, *Syria: Areesheh IDP Camp - General Infrastructure - As of December 2018*, 13 February 2019; Reach, *Syria: Ein Issa IDP Camp - General Infrastructure - As of December 2018*, 14 February 2019; Reach, *Syria: Roj Refugee / IDP Camp - General Infrastructure - As of December 2018*, 13 February 2019; Reach, *Syria: Mabruka IDP Camp - General Infrastructure - As of December 2018*, 13 February 2019; Reach, *Syria: Twahina IDP Camp - General Infrastructure - As of December 2018*, 13 February 2019; Reach, *Syria: Al Hol Refugee / IDP Camp - General Infrastructure - As of December 2018*, 13 February 2019; Reach, *Camp and Informal Site Profiles Northeast Syria - December 2018*, 31 December 2018; Reach, *Camp and Informal Site Profiles Northeast Syria - March 2018*, 23 March 2019.

<sup>655</sup> Stichting Vluchteling, *Reisverslag dag 1: Tineke Ceelen in Al Hol*, 16 March 2019.

The international community is not fully informed about the situation at Al Hol camp. The camp is not managed by aid workers, but by a party to the conflict, the SDF, which determines what information is shared with international organisations. These organisations are concerned, as more than 70,000 displaced persons are in this camp, and no distinction is made between fighters and civilians.<sup>656</sup> Conditions are known not to be good, with the ICRC among the groups that have raised the alarm: babies have died and children are malnourished, yet aid organisations have long been denied access to verify such matters.<sup>657</sup> Although access for UN bodies and NGOs had improved at the end of the reporting period in the areas where the displaced persons are accommodated, access to the secluded 'annexes' where foreign women and children are kept remains restricted. Due to the heavy overcrowding and the limited capacity of the humanitarian organisations present in the camp, aid shortages persist.<sup>658</sup>

#### *Women and children*

In February 2019, the AIVD<sup>659</sup> reported that at least 200 ISIS children from the Netherlands had been taken to or born in Syria and Iraq. At least 170 of them were in Syria, including at least 25 in Kurdish refugee camps.<sup>660</sup> Less than a quarter of the children had been taken to the conflict zone: more than three-quarters were born there. There was a political and social debate during the reporting period that focused in particular on whether it was desirable for these children to return to the Netherlands. The position of the Dutch Cabinet is that it will not send people to unsafe areas to bring Dutch people home. If people report to a Dutch diplomatic representation in the region, their return to the Netherlands can be arranged under the guidance of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee.<sup>661</sup> The Ombudsman for Children was among those who argued that the children should be brought back from the camps.<sup>662</sup> Most of the children are known to the Child Protection Board (Kinderbescherming).<sup>663</sup> Since 2017, the Board has been working on behalf of the Ministries of Justice and Security and Health, Welfare and Sport to prepare a detailed 'repatriation plan' for children of those who travelled to the region to join ISIS.<sup>664</sup>

On 20 February 2018, the Rotterdam District Court ordered the 'detention for extradition to the Netherlands' of a woman held in Al Hol camp in north-eastern Syria.<sup>665</sup> In a judgment of 8 January 2019, the District Court demanded that the government make further efforts.<sup>666</sup> On 21 February 2019, Minister of Justice and

<sup>656</sup> On 29 May 2019, there were 73,477 people in Al Hol; the camp was originally designed for 10,000. Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>657</sup> AFP, *Syrie: HRW réclame transparence et responsabilité sur le transfert des jihadistes*, 7 February 2019; Rode Kruis, *kindersterfte door overvolle kampen*, 5 March 2019; RFE/RL, *Hundreds Of IS Members, Families Surrender In Final Syrian Enclave*, 15 March 2019; Le Monde, *Syrie : dans le camp d'Al-Hol, une situation « intenable » pour les déplacés*, 23 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>658</sup> Several women in Al-Hol told *The Guardian* that prominent IS women in the camp have begun to enforce the strict rules of the Caliphate again, by violent means. Similar rumours have been heard from Al-Roj camp, where there are also many Dutch and Belgian women. *The Guardian*, *Defiant women and dying children: Isis' desert legacy*, 1 March 2019; Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>659</sup> For figures, see the website of the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD). <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/terrorisme/dreiging/uitreizigers-en-terugkeerders>.

<sup>660</sup> The precise figures are hard to establish. Among other things, it is difficult to ascertain whether someone who has travelled to Syria has had children in the conflict zone. *De Volkskrant*, *Ouders Syriëgangsters richten stichting op om overheid tot repatriëring te dwingen*, 8 April 2019; EW, *Debat over Syriëgangsters laait weer op: 2,5 jaar cel geëist tegen IS-vrouw*, 10 April 2019; See also OHCHR, *41st session of the Human Rights Council*, 24 June 2019.

<sup>661</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29754-492.html>.

<sup>662</sup> RFE/RL, *After The Caliphate: To Repatriate Or Not To Repatriate?*, 3 March 2019.

<sup>663</sup> NRC, *Jeugdzorg heeft plan IS-kinderen klaar*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>664</sup> NRC, *Opvang van uitreizigers is geregeld*, 19 February 2019.

<sup>665</sup> Rechtspraak.nl, NJFS 2018/156.

<sup>666</sup> NRC, *België wil kinderen wel terug, maar geen IS-ouders*, 30 January 2019.

Security Grapperhaus sent a letter to the Lower House about this.<sup>667</sup> On 10 June 2019, two orphans who had been assigned by the judge to a guardian in the Netherlands were taken to France on a French aircraft which also transported 12 French children of ISIS parents. From there they were able to continue their journey to the Netherlands.<sup>668</sup>

### *Belgium*

The Belgian state was forced by a court judgment in December 2018 to allow a number of 'caliphate children' to return.<sup>669</sup> However, on 27 February 2019, the Court of Appeal in Brussels ruled that the Belgian state has no authority in the refugee camp and that the women and their children do not fall under the jurisdiction of Belgium there.<sup>670</sup>

### *Criminal prosecution of ISIS fighters*

Kurdish courts have brought thousands of ISIS members to justice pragmatically and with a view to future reconciliation. Compared to the punishments handed out in Iraq, low-profile ISIS members have received light penalties and in some cases an amnesty. However, the legal process lacks transparency, and defendants have no right to appeal.<sup>671</sup>

### *Prosecution in Iraq*

On 11 April 2019, the Kurdish authorities announced that they had concluded an agreement with the Iraqi government to transfer 31,000 Iraqis, mostly women and children, from north-eastern Syria to Iraq. Given earlier trials of ISIS fighters and supporters in Iraq, human rights organisations were concerned about this.<sup>672</sup>

Prosecutions in Iraq are focused on revenge rather than reconciliation. Legal cases are decided quickly, and arbitrary arrest and detention are common.<sup>673</sup> After the fall of Baghouz, the Kurdish authorities called for the establishment of an international tribunal to try the more than a thousand foreign ISIS fighters. Approximately 850 of these are from Europe. On 19 May 2019, Sweden proposed to set up such a tribunal.<sup>674</sup> The Dutch cabinet remains committed to foreign ISIS fighters being tried in the region and, in dialogue with partner countries, is examining what options may be available for, for example, an international tribunal.<sup>675</sup>

<sup>667</sup> NRC, *Komen de Nederlandse kalifaatgangers terug?*, 18 February 2019; Letter to Parliament, The report that Cabinet is looking into bringing those who went to Syria back to the Netherlands (in Dutch), 21 February 2019.

<sup>668</sup> De Volkskrant, *Nederland haalt twee kinderen van IS-strijders terug uit Syrië vanwege 'erbarmelijke leefomstandigheden'*, 10 June 2019. For details see: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2019/06/10/kamerbrief-overbrenging-uit-syrie-van-twee-jonge-nederlandse-weeskinderen>.

<sup>669</sup> NRC, *Frankrijk haalt 130 Syriëgangers terug uit Koerdische kampen*, 29 January 2019.

<sup>670</sup> NRC, *Belgische staat hoeft IS-weduwen en kinderen toch niet terug te halen*, 27 February 2019.

<sup>671</sup> In recent years, hundreds of ISIS fighters have been tried by an anti-terrorism court in Qamishli and a smaller court in Kobani. These courts do not have a mandate to try European ISIS suspects. The Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North Syria is not internationally recognised. According to the existing law, dating from 2014, terrorism suspects are tried without a lawyer before three judges and a public prosecutor. A new law will be published soon. One of the planned changes is that from now on suspects are entitled to a lawyer. NRC, *Een huiskamerrechtbank voor IS'ers*, 31 March 2019; SJAC, *SJAC and Partners Urge Caution with regard to International Tribunal limited to ISIS Crimes*, 4 June 2019.

<sup>672</sup> Pro Justice, *Prosecuting ISIS in Northeast Syria*, 19 April 2019.

<sup>673</sup> SJAC, *SJAC and Partners Urge Caution with regard to International Tribunal limited to ISIS Crimes*, 4 June 2019.

<sup>674</sup> New Europe, *Sweden proposes international ISIS tribunal*, 20 May 2019; SJAC, *SJAC and Partners Urge Caution with regard to International Tribunal limited to ISIS Crimes*, 4 June 2019.

<sup>675</sup> Letter to Parliament of 25 June 2019. See <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKewik-sXSrZvjAhWGEVAKHbbyBaoQFjAAegQIABAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rijksoverheid.nl%2Fbinaries%2Frijksoverheid%2Fdocumenten%2Fkamerstukken%2F2019%2F06%2F25%2Fantwoorden-op-kamervragen-over-de-oprichting-van-een-tribunaal-om-is-strijders-te-vervolgen%2Fantwoorden-op-kamervragen-over-de-oprichting-van-een-tribunaal-om-is-strijders-te-vervolgen.pdf&usq=AOvVaw1ToCg7fh1cMmmE7L-Hhxvu>.

### Germany

In April 2019, an ISIS woman stood trial in Munich for crimes committed against the Yazidi minority in the former caliphate. The Yazidis are a religious minority in Iraq who were regarded by ISIS as devil worshippers. At least 3,000 mainly male Yazidis were killed when ISIS occupied their territory in 2014. Some 7,000 women and children were enslaved or brainwashed by ISIS.<sup>676</sup>

## 4.3 International organisations

### Humanitarian aid

Various international organisations, such as UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, the ICRC, the *Norwegian Refugee Council* (NRC), the *Danish Refugee Council*, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and various international NGOs provide humanitarian aid in Syria to displaced persons, host communities and civilians in besieged areas.<sup>677</sup> There is both cross-border assistance from neighbouring countries and assistance from Damascus. In principle, humanitarian aid for Syria operates on a so-called 'whole of Syria' approach, with five hubs (including Damascus, Gaziantep and Amman) as the bases from which coordination and activities take place.<sup>678</sup> The organisations operating from Syria's neighbouring countries also provide assistance to the nearly six million Syrian refugees. Cooperating organisations attempted to provide civilians in besieged areas with food, medical assistance and vaccinations. They needed permission from the Syrian authorities to do so, and this was not always granted, or granted in time, which hampered the organisations in their aid work. The *Syrian Arab Red Crescent* (SARC) is a Syrian relief organisation affiliated with the Syrian government. It provides assistance in areas under the control of the Syrian government.<sup>679</sup>

The EU also offers civil protection and humanitarian assistance through the Directorate-General for *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations* (ECHO).<sup>680</sup>

UNHCR is in charge of three clusters: the management of camps, including a few camps in the north-east, protection<sup>681</sup> and shelter & NFI<sup>682</sup> (non-food items).<sup>683</sup>

In 2018, more than 688,000 people were displaced (either for the first time or following previous displacements) in north-eastern Syria as a result of conflicts between armed groups, shifts in the front line, political and military control and

<sup>676</sup> NRC, *De IS-vrouwen waren het ergst tegen yezidi's*, 16 April 2019.

<sup>677</sup> Dutch COI report on Syria. The security situation, June 2018.

<sup>678</sup> International NGOs in Damascus are required to sign an MoU with a specific partner, such as the Ministry of Education, Healthcare or Water Supply, local government, the Syrian Crescent or the *Syria Trust*. Most NGOs in Damascus are members of DINGO, the NGO forum that has its office in Damascus. See <https://www.sirf.ngo/>. Most NGOs had signed an MoU before the crisis, some have done so during the crisis and some NGOs, for example, had to stop their cross-border activities in 2018 and subsequently tried to register in Damascus. NGOs work on the basis of project proposals. There are topics that cannot be discussed with the government, such as human rights. NGOs usually propose a concrete project in another sector if they also engage in protection work, such as repairing schools or tents, education or the like. The wording is particularly carefully chosen. There is often a long process of negotiation, revolving around language and words. For example, the Syrian authorities do not accept that there is a lack of freedom of movement in Syria. In recent years, including this year, if the differences cannot be bridged, the agreement has stated that the humanitarian community and the Syrian government do not agree on the assessment of the situation in Syria. Confidential source, 27 March 2019;

<sup>679</sup> Dutch COI report on Syria. The security situation, June 2018.

<sup>680</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/who/about-echo\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/who/about-echo_en).

<sup>681</sup> Protection refers to protection of displaced persons and refugees in the broadest sense: not just against the violence of warring parties, but also legal assistance to recover assets or to obtain identity documents, for example.

<sup>682</sup> Shelter refers to any kind of shelter for displaced persons. Non-food items include pots and pans, blankets and other items for displaced persons and refugees within a camp.

<sup>683</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

reconciliation agreements in former opposition areas. From Turkey, UNHCR provides cross-border assistance to north-western Syria. UNHCR works with six organisations: IRC, ACTED-REACH, WATAN, Bir Dunya Cocuk Dernegi (*Children of One World*), SHAFAK and NRC.<sup>684</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Documents

UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) provide information about Syrian identity documents, both within and outside Syria.<sup>685</sup> The *Norwegian Refugee Council* (NRC) operates in Damascus, north-western Syria and north-eastern Syria (Derik and also Ain Aissa and Raqqa). Its foreign staff work from Amman.<sup>686</sup>

The civil affairs department of the Syrian Ministry of the Interior<sup>687</sup> and UNHCR issued a joint report on 25 April 2019 on the identity and family documents prepared and issued by the Syrian government. The report describes what (legal) purpose each document serves, the requirements for obtaining it and the authority from which it can be requested.<sup>688</sup>

An expert on documents in Syria agrees that the content of this report is broadly correct. However, the same expert points out that there are numerous irregularities in practice, which deviate greatly from the situations described in the report. Even before the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the General Directorate of Civil Affairs at the Ministry of the Interior, known in Syria as *Nofuz*, did not function optimally, and the functioning of the Syrian government system has deteriorated further as a result of the armed conflict. For example, some offices and archives of the General Directorate of Civil Affairs have been damaged or completely destroyed by the fighting. There are also areas controlled by the armed opposition where the Syrian government is unable to provide documents. In theory, it is possible for a displaced person from opposition territory to request and obtain documents in government territory. However, in such a case the Civil Affairs office in the government area needs to be able to inspect the file that is located in the Civil Affairs office in the area of origin of the displaced person. As this is not always possible due to the general situation, the possibilities for IDPs from opposition areas to obtain documents in government areas remain limited. Some authorities in opposition areas also issue documents, but these have little or no legal value outside the area controlled by the issuing authority.<sup>689</sup>

In addition, the same source notes that the turnaround time for a document application is longer than normal because a security check is carried out for each applicant by a security service under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. Among other things, this check examines any military obligations to which a male applicant may be subject; in the case of a female applicant, her male immediate family members and relatives are checked for any military obligations to the Syrian government. Such a security check takes at least a few days. This practice prevents some Syrians from applying for documents from the Syrian authorities or Syrian diplomatic representations, as they fear that this may cause problems for themselves or their loved ones. Due to the widespread corruption in the Syrian government system, requesting and obtaining documents is not only time-

<sup>684</sup> UNHCR, *Cross-Border Humanitarian Response Fact Sheet - Northwest Syria - January 2019*, 31 January 2019.

<sup>685</sup> See also the Dutch COI report on documents in Syria, 9 October 2017.

<sup>686</sup> Confidential source, 17 June 2019. For detailed information see <https://www.nrc.no/countries/middle-east/syria/>. See also Landinfo, *Syria: Marriage legislation and traditions*, 22 August 2018. For more details see Leiden University, *Civil Documentation Strategies in Light of the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, November 2018.

<sup>687</sup> Known in English as *Ministry of Interior / General Directorate of Civil Affairs*.

<sup>688</sup> UNHCR, *Civil documentation and registration in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 25 April 2019, consulted on 5 June 2019.

<sup>689</sup> Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

consuming but also expensive. For this reason alone, many Syrians cannot afford to apply for documents.<sup>690</sup>

Other sources confirm the irregularities that occur in the processing of document applications. One Syrian source states that applying for a national passport from the Syrian representation in Turkey in reality costs USD 1,000 to 1,500,<sup>691</sup> whereas the official passport fees abroad range from USD 300 to 800.<sup>692</sup> Another source stated that his passport application at the Syrian representation in Turkey cost USD 15,000 and took more than five years.<sup>693</sup>

#### 4.3.2 UNRWA

According to UNRWA, there were 438,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria at the end of April 2019.<sup>694</sup> Palestinian refugees in Syria in particular were still vulnerable to displacement, loss of property and the destruction of their neighbourhoods.<sup>695</sup> In March 2019, UNRWA started distributing food packages. By the end of April 2019, more than 118,265 of the 126,000 most vulnerable Palestinians had received these packages.<sup>696</sup> The Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk, which is in fact a residential district, was destroyed but not reconstructed during the reporting period.<sup>697</sup>

#### 4.3.3 UNHCR

UNHCR believes that the current conditions throughout Syria prevent safe and dignified voluntary return.

Two phases are distinguished in UNHCR plans for the return of Syrians.

UNHCR believes that in Phase 1, the current phase, the necessary conditions are not in place for safe and dignified return, although self-organised return is occurring on a limited scale. According to UNHCR, people should not be encouraged to return during Phase 1.

UNHCR involvement in this phase is confined to monitoring refugees and advocating on behalf of their interests. In addition, UNHCR is engaged in the ongoing analysis of obstacles preventing people from returning and the conditions that must be in place for them to return. In consultation with national and international actors, UNHCR is taking action to remove the obstacles. Syrians who go back voluntarily, organising their return themselves, are assisted by the current humanitarian programmes of UNHCR and NGOs operating in Syria.

Phase 2 will not occur until circumstances have changed substantially and large-scale voluntary repatriation can be facilitated by UNHCR and partners. A shift to Phase 2 is only possible when the following four criteria are met:

1. A legal framework that guarantees the rights of returnees and unhindered access to returnees and the areas to which they return;
2. There is clear evidence that the conditions for safe and sustainable protection are met in the areas to which people return;
3. There is an improvement in conditions in these areas;

<sup>690</sup> Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

<sup>691</sup> Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>692</sup> UNHCR, *Civil documentation and registration in the Syrian Arab Republic*, p. 13. A passport application turned around in 10 to 21 working days costs USD 300; an application turned around in 3 working days costs USD 800.

<sup>693</sup> Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>694</sup> UNRWA, *Syria: UNRWA – Humanitarian Snapshot*, April 2019.

<sup>695</sup> OCHA, *2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic*, 1 March 2019; WFP, *Syria Situation Report #4*, April 2019, 30 April 2019.

<sup>696</sup> UNRWA, *Syria: UNRWA – Humanitarian Snapshot*, April 2019.

<sup>697</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/almost-all-unrwa-installations-yarmouk-and-dera%E2%80%99-camp-syria-severely-damaged>.

4. Large numbers of refugees are actively requesting support from UNHCR for their return.<sup>698</sup>

UNHCR distinguishes 22 so-called *protection thresholds* – conditions that must be met before it is possible to envisage organised voluntary returns. These include a significant and lasting reduction in hostilities and a formal agreement between the government, host countries and other actors. According to a report by the *European Institute of Peace*, none of these thresholds have been met.<sup>699</sup>

## 4.4 Repatriation

### 4.4.1 IDP returns

In 2018 and early 2019, some Syrian civilians became displaced and others who had previously been displaced returned to their original home environment. These two opposing flows of displaced persons took place in parallel, in a situation of ongoing conflict and recapture of territory. According to UNHCR, 1.4 million displaced persons returned to their homes in 2018.<sup>700</sup> According to OCHA, 23,621 displaced persons returned home in April 2019 and 27,969 in May 2019.<sup>701</sup>

However, as new displacements are still taking place, it is unknown whether this trend for the displaced to return home is likely to last. It is also unknown what the relationship is between the return of displaced persons who were in a camp and of those who were not.<sup>702</sup> In addition to violence, the lack of facilities and basic necessities or the desire to secure possessions can also be reasons for displaced persons to return. Various sources indicated that returning Syrians – both refugees and displaced persons – are often poorly informed about conditions in the place where they used to live. Every family makes its own assessment about whether to stay or return.<sup>703</sup>

Displaced persons and refugees who want to return to the province of Dara'a, for example, weigh up the potential problems and solutions beforehand. Firstly, for the men, returning may lead to being drafted into the army and sent to a conflict area such as Idlib. Secondly, in general the facilities are not at the same level as in 2010. The reconciliation agreements only talk in terms of 'returning to the facilities'. Education and health care have fallen far behind, and much has been destroyed or badly damaged, including the water and electricity supply. The people in the south compare the facilities with their level in 2010, when they were particularly good. Ninety percent of the population was connected to the electricity grid, and education was free. After opposition groups had forced out the government, the Syrian authorities carried out collective reprisals. After the area was recaptured, the Syrian government had to invest money to repair the water and electricity supply. In November 2018, 50% of the villages had electricity for 20 hours a day, a significant improvement compared to the level when the area was under the control of the opposition. In the best case, villages at that time had electricity for two to six hours a day. Some facilities have been repaired, but have not been returned to pre-2010

<sup>698</sup> UNHCR, *Comprehensive protection and solutions strategy: Protection Thresholds and parameters for refugee return to Syria*, February 2018 <https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/63223>; Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>699</sup> European Institute of peace, *Refugee return in Syria: dangers, security risks and information scarcity*, May 2019

<sup>700</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR - Syria Factsheet*, January 2019.

<sup>701</sup> OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous returns Map (April 2019)*, 14 May 2019; OCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous returns Map (May 2019)*, 31 May 2019.

<sup>702</sup> References to displaced persons' camps also include informal camps and spontaneously created tent camps.

<sup>703</sup> Confidential source, 25 March 2019; Confidential source, 25 March 2019.



levels. Education and health care facilities are by no means at the level prior to the outbreak of the armed conflict.<sup>704</sup>

#### 4.4.2 *Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries*

Millions of Syrians were in neighbouring countries during the reporting period. For the Syrian government this meant, among other things, that they did not have to organise facilities for them and that their vacated houses could be occupied by Syrians who supported the government. The following sections deal with the situation of Syrians in neighbouring countries.<sup>705</sup>

##### 4.4.2.1 Turkey

Syrians in Turkey receive temporary protection status. On 10 September 2018, UNHCR ended the registration and status determination of Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>706</sup> From then on, the Turkish *Directorate General of Migration Management* (DGMM) was the only authority to register and process temporary protection status applications.<sup>707</sup> Registration and processing take place at provincial level in 12 of the 81 provinces, mainly in the border region, unless there are urgent medical reasons.<sup>708</sup>

In May 2019, nearly 3.6 million Syrian refugees were registered with the DGMM. Nearly 96% of Syrian refugees were staying in urban areas, while 4% were accommodated in 13 DGMM temporary reception centres.<sup>709</sup>

In 2018, there were 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey, 93% of them in cities. In June 2018 there were 19 refugee camps; by the end of March 2019, the number of camps had been reduced to 13, including 2 tent camps.<sup>710</sup> Syrians in camps received financial support to settle in the provinces.<sup>711</sup>

#### *Work*

Registered Syrians have access in Turkey to work permits under certain conditions, and to education and health care. If a Syrian with temporary protection status wishes to relocate, for example because he/she has received a work permit through a business in another province, he/she must submit a request for this. If this is approved, he/she will receive a new identity card with the same personal data but a different province name. If someone has moved illegally to another province, he/she

<sup>704</sup> Confidential source, 24 March 2019.

<sup>705</sup> CSIS, *Rubble, Refugees, and Syria's Periphery*, 25 March 2019.

<sup>706</sup> This is also true for refugees of other nationalities.

<sup>707</sup> UNHCR, *UNHCR Turkey Operational Update, Year 2018*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>708</sup> In addition to its headquarters in Ankara, the DGMM has three official offices, one in Hatay province, one in Kilis province (Bab al Hawa), and one in Gaziantep. In addition, there are offices in all Turkish provinces as well as district offices in some provinces. At the border, Syrians can apply for asylum on grounds of family reunification or for health reasons. If they have a valid Syrian passport, they can cross the border. Businessmen with passports travel in and out, and Syrians in possession of a passport are not turned away at the border, but few Syrians enter Turkey with a passport. If Syrians are arrested in Turkey without documents, they are not deported, but referred to the nearest DGMM office. They are registered and receive an identity card there. Although the Turkish border is heavily guarded, around 300,000 newly arrived Syrians were registered in 2018. This is done on a *prima facie* basis. It is not known whether these Syrians went to Turkey for safety or other reasons (such as economic reasons). There have been incidents of shelling at the border, but not systematically. 250,000 people were intercepted at the Turkish-Syrian border in 2018. Some of these may have tried to cross the border several times. Not only people in need of international protection cross the border illegally: there is also a lot of smuggling across the border with Idlib where there is a river. Confidential source, 22 March 2019; Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>709</sup> Some centres were closed in October 2018, after which their occupants were relocated to cities. UNHCR, *Turkey Operational Update, October 2018*, 9 January 2019. See also AIDA, *Country Report: Turkey, 2018 update*, 2018; Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

<sup>710</sup> Winter conditions in these tent camps are poor. Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>711</sup> UNHCR, *Syrian Refugee Camps and Provincial Breakdown of Syrian Refugees Registered in South East Turkey as of 07 February 2019*, 13 February 2019; Confidential source, 22 March 2019; Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

must return to the place he came from. He/she is not punished for this, but initially receives a warning.<sup>712</sup> During the period 2011-2012, the vast majority of Syrians stayed in the south-east, but many subsequently moved to the west, mainly to Istanbul. However, the Turkish government does not transfer the records of Syrians who have gone illegally to Istanbul because there are too many of them. This creates problems with access to facilities.<sup>713</sup>

Of the 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey, approximately 1.5 million receive financial assistance of 120 Turkish lira (EUR 18) per individual per month. Syrians have been able to obtain a work permit since 2016.<sup>714</sup> Some 60,000 Syrians have received a work permit, including 35,000 with temporary protection status; the others have a normal residence permit.<sup>715</sup> The Ministry of Employment receives applications from employers who want to hire Syrians. Applications take between four and eight months to process. According to a source, they are regularly rejected without any reasons being given. Most Syrians are therefore employed in the informal sector, mainly in the textile industry, construction, heavy industry and agriculture. They do jobs that the local population is unwilling or unable to do. Before the arrival of the Syrians, the Kurds had the lower-status jobs on the labour market. Many Syrians work in the shoe industry, in which children also work.<sup>716</sup>

### *Tensions*

The Syrian presence in the informal labour market has created tensions in the community, especially as many Turks lost their jobs in 2018 due to the poor state of the economy. Syrians are regarded as guests, but are not entitled to Turkish citizenship – not even the next generation of Syrians. Citizenship is granted in certain cases, but there are no clear criteria for this.<sup>717</sup> The Turkish government spends tens of millions of euros on provisions for Syrians, but many Turks would rather have jobs created for Turks with this money.<sup>718</sup> Many Syrians prefer to work in the informal sector, which means they get both free access to health care and financial benefits.<sup>719</sup> Some Syrians set up businesses in Turkey. At the beginning of 2019, there were 13,000 businesses registered that were established by a Syrian partner in Turkey. Most of these are export businesses, because they cannot compete in the local labour market; it is hard for Syrian businessmen to penetrate the local market. Syrian supermarkets and restaurants in Istanbul, for example, have mainly Syrian customers. Less than 10% of their customers are Turks. In Istanbul, certain districts are mainly inhabited by Syrians; the Turks move away from these areas. In the Fatih district in Istanbul there are 57 shops on both sides of

<sup>712</sup> If someone from the province wants to take a train or bus, he/she must show an ID card to buy a ticket. Foreigners must show their identity card, which has an alien number on it. Some use counterfeit numbers. The number on the ticket must match the alien number on the ID card. Transport companies are required to monitor this. Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>713</sup> Those who have not registered elsewhere previously can register in Istanbul, however. Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>714</sup> Work permits must be applied for by the employer, who has to pay a fee. This fee was halved by the Ministry of Employment in 2018. The fee does not have to be paid to hire Turks, or to hire Syrians without declaring it. 30% of Turks work on the black market. Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>715</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>716</sup> The net minimum wage in Turkey is 2,200 Turkish lira (EUR 332) per month. Pay in the informal sector depends on a person's abilities, age and knowledge of Turkish. A minor receives 1,000-1,200 Turkish lira (EUR 150-180) if he/she works 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. Someone over the age of 18 can receive a salary of 1,600 Turkish lira (EUR 240), or possibly the minimum wage. Many employers pay less than the minimum wage. Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>717</sup> Since 2016, 80,000 Syrians have been naturalised, including 29,000 minors. Confidential source, 22 March 2019. See also ABC News, *Syrian refugees who fled to Turkey face backlash*, 18 March 2019.

<sup>718</sup> Confidential source, 22 March 2019; ICG, *Mitigating Risks for Syrian Refugee Youth in Turkey's Şanlıurfa*, 11 February 2019,

<sup>719</sup> A family of five receives 600 lira (EUR 90), with which the rent can be paid. The rent for an apartment for a family of five depends on the location. In a cheap neighbourhood of Ankara, an apartment with three bedrooms and a living room can be found for 800-900 Turkish lira. Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

the boulevard, 52 of which were owned or rented by Syrians in March 2019. The remaining five Turkish shop-owners were planning to move to another district because they no longer had any customers.<sup>720</sup>

#### *Harmonisation policy*

The Turkish government operates a harmonisation policy. Syrian children receive Turkish education, gaining a recognised diploma.<sup>721</sup> At the end of October 2018, there were 641,630 Syrian students enrolled in Turkish schools. In addition, more than 20,700 Syrian students were enrolled in universities and other higher education institutions.<sup>722</sup>

Syrian adults can attend Turkish lessons free of charge, which enables them to make better use of public facilities and promotes integration.<sup>723</sup>

The number of newborn Syrian babies is estimated at 60,000 per year.<sup>724</sup> Syrian babies born in Turkey have the same status as other Syrians. Turkey issues a birth certificate so that they can apply for Syrian nationality on their return to Syria.<sup>725</sup> Newborn babies can be registered at the Syrian consulate; according to a source, it charges USD 3,000 for this, which few Syrians can afford.<sup>726</sup>

#### *Temporary return*

Syrians in Turkey may return to Syria temporarily. They can submit an online application in Arabic on a DGMM website. After they have entered their identity number, a period is indicated within which they can leave the country and return. In 2018, 153,300 Syrians left Turkey during Ramadan,<sup>727</sup> 145,937 of whom returned to Turkey. Buses run to the border on both the Turkish and the Syrian side. Syrians who return temporarily are not registered at the border. They usually go to Syria to see what has happened to their possessions and to visit relatives. Syrians returning to Turkey have stated that they were checking whether it was safe and whether there were opportunities to earn an income. It has been established that 55,000 Syrians voluntarily returned from Turkey to Syria in the years up to and including 2018.<sup>728</sup> The Turkish authorities say that 381,000 Syrians have returned from Turkey to Syria, but this number is not broken down into totals per year and cannot be verified by UNHCR.<sup>729</sup>

#### 4.4.2.2

##### Jordan

The extensive family ties that link the south of Syria and the north of Jordan mean that violence and displacement in southern Syria are also domestic issues in Jordan.<sup>730</sup> On 15 January 2019, 671,579 Syrians were registered as refugees in

<sup>720</sup> There are many tensions in the Fatih district. Some Turkish residents say that the composition of the population is changing, that the Syrians change the culture, stay up late, talk loudly, cook spicy food, do not speak Turkish properly, and do not respect the elderly. There have been fights between Syrians and Turks. Thousands of Syrians have been deported to other provinces because people have no longer accepted them. Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>721</sup> Sixty-three percent of Syrians of compulsory education age attend Turkish education. It is difficult for Syrian students who do not start in first grade, and many drop out. Teachers also lack the skills to work with foreign students. Many Syrian students are traumatised by their experiences of the war. Well-trained Syrians would be able to help, but have not received permission to do so. Confidential source, 22 March 2019; Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>722</sup> UNHCR, *Turkey Operational Update, October 2018*, 9 January 2019.

<sup>723</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>724</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>725</sup> Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>726</sup> Confidential source, 22 March 2019.

<sup>727</sup> Most Syrians who return temporarily are men, who represent their family. Most go to an area that is not under the control of the Syrian government. Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>728</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>729</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>730</sup> In the first few months after the May 2017 de-escalation, more refugees from Jordan returned to south-western Syria. However, they sent negative reports about local conditions to relatives who had stayed behind in Jordan.

Jordan. Of these, 545,670 people were living in cities and 125,909 in camps. Children make up almost half of all Syrian refugees.<sup>731</sup> In Jordan, UNHCR coordinates assistance to refugees in collaboration with other UN and international organisations and with international and local NGOs including the *Norwegian Refugee Council* (NRC), WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and the *Danish Refugee Council* (DRC). In addition, UNHCR provides support to the *Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate* (SRAD), the Jordanian government agency that manages the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps.<sup>732</sup> Syrian refugees live in Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, Mafraq and elsewhere, as well as in refugee camps.<sup>733</sup> At the beginning of 2019, more than 78,000 Syrian refugees were staying in the Zaatari refugee camp, which is close to the border with Syria. More than 18,000 children were attending 32 different schools.

### Work

Nearly 120,000 refugees had a work permit. The Zaatari camp is jointly managed by the *Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate* and UNHCR. Over the years, the camp has grown from a small tented camp into a city district.<sup>734</sup> Refugees in the Azraq camp can also get a work permit and work outside the camp. Within the camps there are limited opportunities for economic activity, in particular through *cash for work* programmes, for example in the maintenance of the camp or the installation of solar panels.<sup>735</sup>

Ninety-eight percent of Syrians outside the camps rent an apartment. The average rent is JD 80 to 150 (EUR 100-185) per month. Fifty-one percent of Syrian households live mainly on one salary, and 26% on remittances from family members outside Jordan. In Amman, Irbid and Zarqa, the average annual income of a household is around JD 3,000 (EUR 3,730); in the camps and in the province of Mafraq it is around JD 2,000 (EUR 2,490). Eighty-nine percent of households have satellite TV. Many Syrian refugees in Jordan report a lack of food and financial and health problems. Fifteen percent of Syrian refugees have had secondary or higher education. All Syrian school-age pupils attend primary school. Unemployment among Syrian refugees in Jordan has fallen from 61% in 2014 to 25% in 2018. Syrians are employed as construction workers, domestic workers, waiters and market vendors, industrial workers, doctors, nurses and teachers. Net salaries fluctuate between JD 150 and 288 per month.<sup>736</sup> For more information on income, expenses, debts, vulnerability and other aspects of the life of Syrian refugees in Jordan, refer to a study by UNHCR.<sup>737</sup>

Between 2016 and 2018, the Jordanian Ministry of Employment issued more than 120,000 work permits to Syrian refugees in Jordan for jobs in construction, agriculture, industry and food processing. In addition, in November 2018, the

Refugees returning from Jordan cannot go back there if violence breaks out again. ICG, Middle East Report N°187 - Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria, 21 June 2018.

<sup>731</sup> Of the Syrian refugees in Jordan, 48% are from Dara'a, 19% from Homs, 10% from Aleppo, 9% from Rif Damascus and 8% from the city of Damascus. UNHCR, *UNHCR Registered Syrians in Jordan*, 15 January 2019. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67845>. GoJ/Fafo, *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan: Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*, 10 February 2019.

<sup>732</sup> UNHCR, *Jordan Factsheet - January 2019*, 31 January 2019.

<sup>733</sup> GoJ/Fafo, *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan: Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*, 10 February 2019.

<sup>734</sup> UNHCR, *Zaatari Refugee Camp - Factsheet, January 2019*, 4 March 2019.

<sup>735</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/cash-work-zaatari-camp-basic-needs-and-livelihoods-working-group-april-2017>.

<sup>736</sup> It is not known whether all these Syrians had a work permit. GoJ/Fafo, *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan: Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*, 10 February 2019.

<sup>737</sup> UNHCR, *Vulnerability Assessment Framework – Population study 2019*, 2019.

Ministry gave permission to Syrian refugees to set up their own home-based businesses in the areas of food, clothing and handicraft products.<sup>738</sup>

#### *Financial assistance*

In 2018, 340,530 Syrian refugees and 26,379 refugees of other nationalities received financial assistance to get through the winter. In December 2018, the Jordanian telephone helpline answered 569,578 calls, mainly with requests for financial assistance.<sup>739</sup>

#### 4.4.2.3

##### Lebanon

In Lebanon, UNHCR has registered more than 950,000 Syrian refugees. However, the Lebanese government estimates the total number of Syrians in Lebanon at 1.5 million. The presence of so many refugees places great pressure on infrastructure and facilities and puts the patience and hospitality of the host community to the test.<sup>740</sup> A survey of 1,800 Syrian refugees in Lebanon conducted by the *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre* (IDMC) in mid-2018 found that 45% of them had been directly exposed to violence in Syria. The three main reasons for fleeing were economic hardship, threats to safety and the desire for family reunification. About 12% had been displaced within Syria before fleeing to Lebanon.<sup>741</sup> From Lebanon, some Syrians<sup>742</sup> are able to cross the border and travel back and forth to see how their family and their possessions are doing.<sup>743</sup> Sixty percent of the Syrians stated that they wanted to return home, and only 18% said they would not return under any circumstances. During group discussions it emerged that the vast majority regretted their decision to flee across the border and would have preferred to stay in Syria.<sup>744</sup>

In January 2019, more than 25,600 Syrian refugees in 639 makeshift refugee camps were affected by violent storms, rains, snowfall and flooding in Lebanon. Many tents were damaged so badly that refugees had to be transferred to other camps or temporarily housed in other camps, schools or mosques.<sup>745</sup>

#### 4.4.2.4

##### Egypt

At the end of 2018, UNHCR had registered 242,873 refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt, 55% of whom were Syrian refugees.<sup>746</sup>

#### 4.4.2.5

##### Iraq

At the end of April 2019, there were 253,672 UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees in Iraq. Of these, 99% were living in the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR) – 37% in refugee camps,<sup>747</sup> and the rest in cities and smaller towns in the provinces of Suleymania, Dohuk and Erbil.<sup>748</sup> The refugee camps in the KAR are much better

<sup>738</sup> UNHCR, *Jordan: Livelihood Opportunities for Refugees - February 2019*, 6 February 2019.

<sup>739</sup> UNHCR, *Jordan: UNHCR Operational Update, January 2019*, 31 January 2019.

<sup>740</sup> UNHCR, *Lebanon Factsheet*, 31 January 2019; UNHCR, *Lebanon: Inter-Agency Coordination End-Year 2018 Statistical Dashboard*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>741</sup> IDMC, *IDPs & Refugees: Two Sides of the Same Coin*, 21 January 2019.

<sup>742</sup> This depends on their legal, political and financial status/situation in both Syria and Lebanon. According to UNHCR Lebanon, it is often women and children who go back first to sound things out, while the men stay behind for various reasons such as fear of the Syrian authorities or having work/income elsewhere. Confidential source, 5 June 2019.

<sup>743</sup> IDMC, *IDPs & Refugees: Two Sides of the Same Coin*, 21 January 2019.

<sup>744</sup> IDMC, *IDPs & Refugees: Two Sides of the Same Coin*, 21 January 2019.

<sup>745</sup> OCHA, *Humanitarian Bulletin Lebanon Issue 34*, 25 February 2019.

<sup>746</sup> UNHCR, *Egypt Factsheet*, 31 December 2018.

<sup>747</sup> The refugee camps are Domiz 1 (34,133), Domiz 2 (10,580), Gawilan (8,972), Darashakran (11,906), Qushtapa (8,186), Kawergosk (7,857) and Basirma (2,857). <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/6>.

<sup>748</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/15>. See also NRC, *Far from Home - Prospects for Syrian Refugees in Iraq*, January 2019.

<sup>749</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

than the IDP camps in Syria.<sup>749</sup> As well as the UNHCR-recognised refugees, there are also Syrians in the KAR who are not registered. Those with refugee status are not entitled to a financial allowance and therefore have to work to earn a living. They had limited access to health care in the refugee camps; however, the Ministry of Health put an end to this in 2018. Recognised refugee status allows the holder to get a job. In the KAR, Syrian Kurds have more freedom of movement than Syrian Arabs.<sup>750</sup> The latter need a permit to go to another province. The Syrian Kurds do not generally stay in refugee camps; they have been absorbed into the local population.<sup>751</sup> More Syrian Arabs live in the refugee camps.<sup>752</sup>

#### *Work*

Many Syrian refugees work in restaurants and in jobs that Iraqis do not normally do. Syrian Kurds also set up their own businesses. A waiter earns approximately USD 500 a month – a high salary compared to wages in Syria. However, rents are high and Syrian Kurds have to send money to family in Syria. Many Syrian Kurds in the KAR also have family in Turkey. In addition, refugees have to pay for health care: some refugees receive hospital bills for tens of thousands of dollars.<sup>753</sup>

On 13 February 2019, the prime minister of Iraq announced that suspected Iraqi ISIS fighters and their families would be sent back to Iraq from Syria.<sup>754</sup> Their number at that time was estimated at 4,000 to 6,000. They were to be housed in camps. Aid workers were concerned that people who were only related to fighters would be locked up.<sup>755</sup>

#### 4.4.3

#### *Refugee returns*<sup>756</sup>

More than thirteen million people have been displaced within and outside Syria during the conflict, which has now lasted more than eight years. Now that direct hostilities have been reduced and President Assad and his allies have regained control of southern and central Syria, the pressure on refugees in neighbouring countries to return has increased. This new phase in the civil war has also led to the so-called voluntary return of refugees experiencing difficulties in the countries where they are staying as refugees. Little is known about the conditions in the places to which the refugees return, or about how the repatriation process works – not even to the returning refugees themselves. As the Syrian government gains control of more and more areas, less and less information is available. Those who live in government areas are afraid to communicate with family and friends in other parts of Syria or neighbouring countries. UNHCR has limited access to information from the Syrian government.<sup>757</sup> Reasons for not returning are concerns about damage to

<sup>749</sup> For example, there is a big difference between the Domiz camp and all other camps in the KAR and the Al Hol camp in Syria. There is also a big difference with the displaced persons' camps in Iraq. Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>750</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019. See also DSP, *Far from Home - Future Prospects for Syrian Refugees in Iraq*, January 2019.

<sup>751</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>752</sup> The Syrian Kurds have fled to the KAR because it is close by and they have the same culture and (virtually) the same language, Kurdish. They left Syria because of military service and the war. Another factor is the internal political struggle in north-eastern Syria. Young Syrians say they are not going back because of compulsory military service, lack of opportunities (especially economic opportunities), limited freedom of movement and the fact that they have to fight alongside Kurdish troops. Women are also called up for military service. Syrian Kurds can visit their relatives in Syria if the latter need something. It is especially easy for women and the elderly to travel easily. Men can be arrested for military service and are therefore more cautious. Confidential source, 28 March 2019; Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>753</sup> Confidential source, 28 March 2019.

<sup>754</sup> HRW, *Families of Iraqi ISIS Suspects Transferred from Syria*, 24 February 2019.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid.

<sup>756</sup> In many of the sources and in this official report, the term 'refugees' is used to refer to Syrians who have fled abroad. It does not necessarily mean refugees with status under the Refugee Convention.

<sup>757</sup> EIP, *Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security risks and Information scarcity*, May 2019. See also The World Bank, *End of Fighting in Syria Not Enough for Spontaneous Return of Syrian Refugees*, 6 February 2019.

homes and lack of money for repairs, limited basic services, lack of jobs and documents and military service. In addition, organisations point to the consequences of political opposition and the general lack of trust in information from the Syrian government.<sup>758</sup>

#### *Repatriation procedure*

Syrians wishing to return must submit an application to the Syrian diplomatic representation in their country of residence. At the embassy or consulate, the applicant is asked about the reasons why he or she left Syria, what he or she did in the host country and what income he or she had. The Syrian embassy sends the information about the applicant to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This ministry carries out security checks and verifies whether the applicant has Syrian nationality.<sup>759</sup> According to the SOHR, those who have not been involved in opposition activities do not experience any problems when returning to Syria. They can put their status in order by bribing security services.<sup>760</sup> Syrians considering returning ask acquaintances in Syria to check whether they are on a list of wanted persons. According to sources, amounts ranging from a few hundred to five thousand dollars have been requested or paid to have an arrest warrant withdrawn.<sup>761</sup> Those who left Syria and stayed in Lebanon without visas have had to return unofficially to Syria to avoid problems with the Lebanese authorities (arrest, deportation, prohibition of re-entry to Lebanon and fines) and the Syrian authorities at the border.<sup>762</sup>

Recent reports suggest that Russia and Lebanon have discussed the conditions for refugee repatriation and have put pressure on the Syrian government to make concessions to allow Syrian refugees to return from Lebanon. The emphasis is on improvements in the areas of housing, land and property, identity cards and military service, but the conditions (protection thresholds) set by UNHCR for a dignified and sustainable return have not yet been discussed. Research has found that 19% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon have no intention of ever returning; 85% say they will not return in the next twelve months.<sup>763</sup> On 26 February 2019, President Michel Aoun declared that Lebanon would continue to repatriate Syrian refugees to safe areas in Syria 'without waiting for a political solution that may take a long time'.<sup>764</sup> On 4 May 2019, President Aoun declared that Lebanon would attempt to organise the repatriation of Syrian refugees on a large scale. According to Aoun, 194,000 Syrian refugees had already returned to Syria from Lebanon, and there were no reports that they had been ill-treated there.<sup>765</sup> However, UNHCR stated that in 2018

<sup>758</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>759</sup> The first objective of this procedure is to ensure that only Syrians return to Syria. The Syrian authorities assume that since the outbreak of the war, people of other nationalities have used forged documents, mainly produced in Turkey, to obtain asylum in Western countries. The second objective of the procedure is to inform those wishing to return about the possibility of criminal prosecution. Those liable to prosecution face problems with their return, unless they reach an agreement with the Syrian authorities concerning their prosecution before returning. Those who have left Syria illegally can apply for a new document from the Syrian embassy. After the applicant's identity has been established with the help of family members or a legal representative, the applicant receives the requested document. DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>760</sup> According to the SOHR, they charge large sums for this – at least USD 5,000. DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>761</sup> Syrians share the names of government officials who are open to bribes. DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019; Confidential source, 19 March 2019.

<sup>762</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>763</sup> Sheltercluster, *Syria: 2019 Shelter Bi-Monthly Issue No. 24*, 27 March 2019; UNHCR, *Provision of Life-Saving Assistance and Supporting Communities*, 2018.

<sup>764</sup> Arab News, *Lebanese president pledges safe return of Syrian refugees*, 27 February 2019. See also The Syrian Observer, *Syrians Fled for a Reason. Now Their Safe Return Is at Stake*, 8 April 2019.

<sup>765</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, *Aoun: Lebanon Could Organize Return of Syrian Refugees with Damascus*, 4 May 2019.

only 14,496 refugees were found to have returned voluntarily from Lebanon to Syria, and that the total for the first three months of 2019 was 4,008.<sup>766</sup>

UNHCR and the Russian Ministry of Defence are trying –independently of one another – to monitor the return of displaced persons and refugees. At the end of 2018, UNHCR had registered 135,718 refugees who had returned from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt since September 2015, including 56,047 who had returned of their own free will in 2018.<sup>767</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defence stated on 8 February 2019 that since 18 July 2018 127,463 Syrians had returned home from abroad, including 52,580 refugees from Lebanon and 74,883 from Jordan.<sup>768</sup> UNHCR also reported that 1.4 million displaced persons had returned from other parts of the country.<sup>769</sup>

It is not known whether the returnees have all been able to return to their own homes or whether they have returned from abroad to a situation of displacement, and how sustainable their return has been. Some have returned temporarily to assess whether returning with the whole family would be safe and advisable. Return from abroad is prompted by factors such as difficult residence conditions in the host country and/or the wish to secure possessions and/or the wish to be reunited with family in Syria. Where family reunification was a motive, this included families who were following a deported family member back to Syria and families who were urged to return by an old and/or dependent family member who had stayed behind. It should also be noted that entire families did not always return. People mentioned the following as the main reasons for not wanting to return (yet): fear of reprisals by the Syrian authorities and socio-economic reasons such as lack of accommodation and facilities and lack of education for their children.<sup>770</sup>

During the previous reporting period, two lists were circulating on the Internet with names of persons wanted by the Syrian authorities. However, these lists have been removed from the relevant websites.<sup>771</sup>

#### *Repatriation from Europe*

There has been no large-scale return from Europe.<sup>772</sup>

There is no reliable information available about the number of Syrians who have returned to Syria from Europe. Sporadic stories of Syrians returning from a European country appear in the media.<sup>773</sup> The Syrian government claims that it does not arrest or prosecute individuals for applying for asylum in neighbouring or other countries. Another source confirms this, but adds that well-known political or military opponents do not return because they know they will be arrested immediately.<sup>774</sup>

#### *Treatment on return*

<sup>766</sup> [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria\\_durable\\_solutions](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions). Consulted on 20 May 2019.

<sup>767</sup> The number may be higher. UNHCR is unable to register all returnees: not all returnees report their return, and UNHCR also has no access to the border between Lebanon and Syria, across which many returnees pass.

<sup>768</sup> Russian Ministry of Defense, 'Bulletin of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring', 8 February 2019.

<sup>769</sup> UNHCR 2018.

<sup>770</sup> IDMC, *IDPs & Refugees: Two Sides of the Same Coin*, 21 January 2019.

<sup>771</sup> <https://leaks.zamanalwsl.net/1.5m.php>; The following phrase appears on the Arabic website: 'No data available in table'. (consulted on 7 June 2019). List of those wanted for military service <http://leaks.zamanalwsl.net/matlobeen.php> The following phrase appears on the Arabic website: 'No data available in table'. (consulted on 7 June 2019).

<sup>772</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.

<sup>773</sup> CSM, *No haven from hardship: Why some Syrians return from Europe*, 10 December 2018; BBC News, *The Syrians returning home after years of fleeing war*, 19 February 2019; Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>774</sup> DRC, *Syria: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019.



Sources make no distinction between return from countries in the local region and from countries in Europe.

As far as is known, the majority of returned refugees go back to territory controlled by an opposition group.<sup>775</sup> The total size of the territory in the hands of the opposition is decreasing as the Syrian authorities recapture territory. Across Syria, it is important for returnees to return to their place of origin. If they do so, they can rely on a social network and/or the tribe. Those returning from abroad to an area where they were not originally from lack such a safety net.<sup>776</sup>

Those returning to Syria return to a country where, according to the OHCHR, there is no rule of law, freedom of expression is suppressed, human rights violations are widespread and the economic situation is poor.<sup>777</sup>

<sup>775</sup> Confidential source, 21 March 2019.

<sup>776</sup> Confidential source, 25 March 2019; Confidential source, 25 March 2019.

<sup>777</sup> OHCHR, *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible*, 28 February 2019. Confidential source, 6 June 2019.

## 5 Appendixes

### 5.1 Abbreviations used

ALF	– <i>Afrin Liberation Forces</i>
DGMM	– <i>Directorate General of Migration Management</i>
DRC	– <i>Danish Refugee Council</i>
ECHO	– <i>European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations</i>
FSA	– <i>Free Syrian Army, Vrije Syrische Leger</i>
FSP	– <i>Free Syrian Police</i>
HAD	– <i>Hurras al-Din</i>
HNC	– <i>High Negotiations Committee</i>
HTS	– <i>Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham</i>
ICRC	– <i>Internationale Comité van het Rode Kruis</i>
IDMC	– <i>Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre</i>
IED	– <i>Improvised Explosive Device</i>
ISIS	– <i>al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham, Islamitische Staat in Irak en de Levant</i>
ISW	– <i>Institute for the Study of War</i>
JKBW	– <i>Jaysh Khalid bin al-Waleed</i>
KAR	– <i>Kurdish Autonomous Region</i>
KNC	– <i>Kurdish National Council</i>
KRG	– <i>Kurdistan regional Government</i>
LDHR	– <i>Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights</i>
NES	– <i>Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria</i>
NLF	– <i>National Liberation Front</i>
NRC	– <i>Norwegian Refugee Council</i>
NSAG	– <i>Non-state armed groups</i>
OPCW	– <i>Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons</i>
PYD	– <i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party</i>
RCC	– <i>Raqqa Civil Council</i>
SAA	– <i>Syrian Arab Army</i>
SARC	– <i>Syrian Arab Red Crescent</i>
SDF	– <i>Syrian Democratic Forces</i>
SIG	– <i>Syrian Interim Government</i>
SNC	– <i>Syrian Negotiations Committee</i>
SNHR	– <i>Syrian Network for Human Rights</i>
SOC	– <i>Syrian Opposition Coalition</i>
SOHR	– <i>Syrian Observatory of Human Rights</i>
SRAD	– <i>Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate</i>
SSG	– <i>Syrian Salvation Government</i>
UNDOF	– <i>UN Disengagement Observer Force</i>
UNHCR	– <i>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</i>
UNRWA	– <i>United Nation Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East</i>
VDC	– <i>Violations Documentation Center in Syria</i>
UN	– <i>United Nations</i>
US	– <i>United States of America</i>
WFP	– <i>World Food Programme</i>
WHO	– <i>World Health Organization</i>
YPG	– <i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, People's Protection Units</i>
YPJ	– <i>Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê, Women's Protection Units</i>

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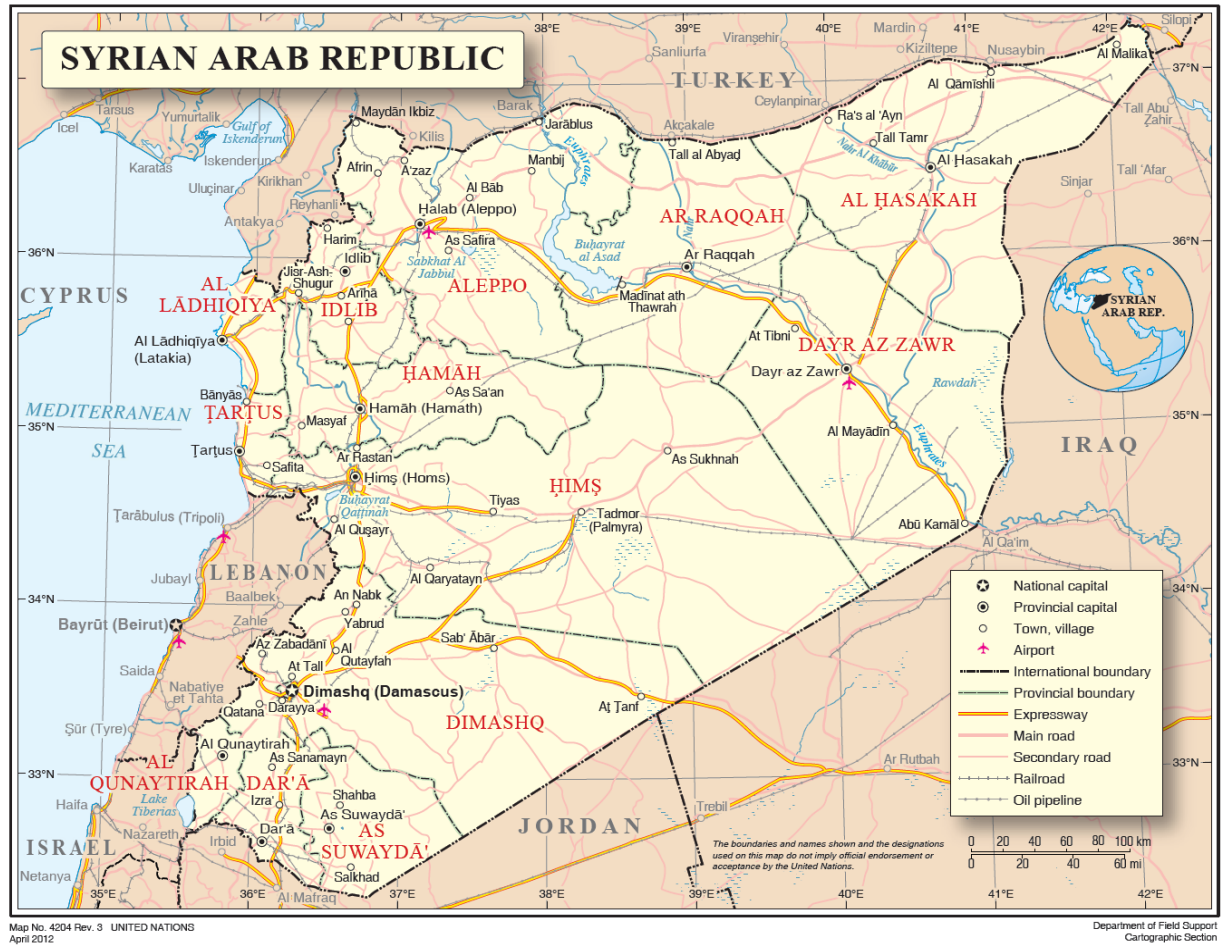
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### 5.3 Map of Syria



Source: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf>