



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Syria: the Syrian Civil War

Version 4.0
August 2020

Preface

Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in the [Introduction](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into two main sections: (1) analysis and assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note – i.e. the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw – by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment of, in general, whether one or more of the following applies:

- A person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- The general humanitarian situation is so severe as to breach Article 15(b) of European Council Directive 2004/83/EC (the Qualification Directive) / Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights as transposed in paragraph 339C and 339CA(iii) of the Immigration Rules
- The security situation presents a real risk to a civilian's life or person such that it would breach Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive as transposed in paragraph 339C and 339CA(iv) of the Immigration Rules
- A person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- A person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- A claim is likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- If a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case's specific facts.

Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual, 2013](#). Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

The structure and content of the country information section follows a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to this note.

All information included in the note was published or made publicly available on or before the 'cut-off' date(s) in the country information section. Any event taking place or report/article published after these date(s) is not included.

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available, and is from generally reliable sources. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information, and
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided of the issues relevant to this note.

Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source, however, is not an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a brief footnote; full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

Contents

Assessment	6
1. Introduction	6
1.1 Basis of claim	6
2. Consideration of issues	6
2.1 Credibility	6
2.2 Exclusion	6
2.3 Convention reason(s)	7
2.4 Risk	7
2.5 Protection	10
2.6 Internal relocation	11
2.7 Certification	11
Country information	13
3. Background	13
3.1 Difficulties with obtaining reliable information	13
3.2 Circumstances that lead to the civil war	13
3.3 Timeline	14
3.4 Situation as at end of June 2020	16
3.5 Statistics	17
4. Protagonists	19
4.1 Pro-government forces	19
4.2 Non-state armed groups and opposition forces	25
5. Nature and level of violence	31
5.1 In general	31
5.2 Idlib	38
5.3 Hama	43
5.4 Aleppo	46
5.5 Damascus	49
5.6 Homs	51
6. Humanitarian situation	52
6.1 Overview	52
6.2 Northwest Syria	55
6.3 Damascus	60
7. Freedom of movement	61
8. Returning to Syria	62
8.1 Security clearance	62

8.2 Treatment upon return.....	62
Annex A: Map of Syria	66
Terms of Reference.....	67
Bibliography	68
Sources cited.....	68
Sources consulted but not cited.....	73
Version control.....	77

Assessment

Updated: 15 July 2020

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 That a person is at risk of serious harm or persecution from rebel groups on the basis of actual or perceived support for the ruling Assad regime; **or**
- 1.1.2 That a person is at risk of serious harm or persecution from the Assad regime on the basis of actual or perceived support for Syrian rebel groups; **and/or**
- 1.1.3 That the general humanitarian situation in Syria is so severe as to make removal to this country a breach of Article 15(b) (torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of an applicant in the country of origin) European Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2014 (the Qualification Directive) / Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as transposed in paragraph 339C and 339CA(iii) of the Immigration Rules; **and/or**
- 1.1.4 The security situation presents a real risk to a civilian's life or person such that removal would be in breach of Article 15(c) (serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict) of European Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2014 (the Qualification Directive), as transposed in paragraph 339C and 339CA(iv) of the Immigration Rules.

[Back to Contents](#)

2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.2 Exclusion

- 2.2.1 All sides in the conflict have been responsible for serious human rights abuses (see [Protagonists](#) and [Nature and level of violence](#)). Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.
- 2.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection.

- 2.2.3 For further guidance on the exclusion clauses and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instructions on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and [Restricted Leave](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.3 Convention reason(s)

- 2.3.1 Actual or imputed political opinion in the form of actual or perceived support for either the ruling Assad regime or the Syrian rebel groups.
- 2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the particular person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their actual or imputed convention reason.
- 2.3.3 Decision makers must first consider if the person qualifies for asylum under the Refugee Convention. If they do not, consider whether the person is eligible for humanitarian protection, first under Articles 2/3 ECHR / Articles 15a and b of the Qualification Directive and second under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive.
- 2.3.4 A state of civil instability and/or where law and order has broken down does not of itself give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution for a Convention reason.
- 2.3.5 This document does not provide guidance on other types of asylum claims. Decision makers must note that, in most cases, a person will likely qualify for asylum for the reasons given below (see [General risk on return](#)).
- 2.3.6 For further guidance on the five convention grounds, including particular social groups, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#). For guidance on HP, see the [Asylum Instruction on Humanitarian Protection](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.4 Risk

a. General approach

- 2.4.1 In the country guidance case [AK \(Article 15\(c\) Afghanistan CG \[2012\] UKUT 00163\(IAC\)](#), the Upper Tribunal held that ‘the need, when dealing with asylum-related claims based wholly or significantly on risks arising from situations of armed conflict and indiscriminate violence, to assess whether Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive is engaged, should not lead to judicial or other decision-makers going straight to Article 15(c). The normal course should be to deal with the issue of refugee eligibility, subsidiary (humanitarian) protection eligibility and Article 3 ECHR in that order.’ (para 249A(ii) and headnote A(ii)).
- 2.4.2 Therefore, decision makers must first consider if the person faces persecution or serious harm for a Refugee Convention reason. However, a state of civil instability and/or where law and order has broken down does not of itself give rise to a well-founded fear of persecution for a Convention reason.

[Back to Contents](#)

b. General risk on return

- 2.4.3 In the Country Guidance case of [KB \(Failed asylum seekers and forced returnees\) Syria CG \[2012\] UKUT 426 \(IAC\) \(20 December 2012\)](#), heard 6-7 March 2012, 7 August 2012 and promulgated on 20 December 2012, the Upper Tribunal (UT) found that ‘in the context of the extremely high level of human rights abuses currently occurring in Syria, a regime which appears increasingly concerned to crush any sign of resistance, it is likely that a failed asylum seeker or forced returnee would, in general, on arrival face a real risk of arrest and detention and of serious mistreatment during that detention as a result of imputed political opinion. That is sufficient to qualify for refugee protection. The position might be otherwise in the case of someone who, notwithstanding a failed claim for asylum, would still be perceived on return to Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime’ (paragraph 32).
- 2.4.4 The available country evidence indicates that eight years on the situation in Syria still remains volatile and unpredictable. There have been recent reports of returnees, particularly those originating in areas formerly held by rebel groups, being arrested, detained, harassed, extorted, tortured, killed or forcibly conscripted despite having filled out the required forms and documentation to return legally. While there are particular risk profiles which appear more susceptible to arrest and mistreatment, arrests are reported to take place across all demographics. Based on the available country evidence, there are not very strong grounds supported by cogent evidence to depart from this caselaw (see [Returning to Syria](#)).

[Back to Contents](#)

c. Humanitarian situation

- 2.4.5 The civil war has resulted in the displacement of over 11 million civilians – 6.1 million displaced within the Syrian Arab Republic, while 5.6 million are registered as refugees outside of Syria. Within Syria there are an estimated 11.7 million people in need whose physical security, basic rights, dignity, living conditions or livelihoods are threatened or have been disrupted, and whose current level of access to basic services, goods and protection is inadequate to re-establish normal living conditions within their accustomed means without assistance (see [Humanitarian situation](#)).
- 2.4.6 An escalation of conflict in northwest Syria in late 2019 has forced hundreds of thousands of men, women and children to flee their homes and live in overcrowded makeshift camps along the Syrian border, with limited access to food, water, health care and medicine. Idlib and Aleppo governorates – already hosting 1.12 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of November 2019 – saw an increase of 959,000 people in just under three months between December 2019 and February 2020, adding further strain to host community infrastructures. Following a ceasefire in March 2020 an estimated 180,000 people were able to return to their area of origin by June 2020, however some 780,000 people remain displaced as a result of the conflict between December 2019 and March 2020. Of the 4 million people living in northwest Syria, 2.7 million people are estimated to be internally displaced (see [Humanitarian situation](#)).
- 2.4.7 The most urgent needs of those recently displaced individuals are shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, food and protection. Humanitarian support

remains limited due to barriers in access. In northern Aleppo, the primary barrier for further humanitarian assistance was access restrictions from actors controlling the area. In Idlib, infrastructure or physical barriers were reported to be the key challenge to delivering humanitarian assistance. Other barriers include the displacement of humanitarian partners away from areas with high levels of people in need, contamination by explosive remnants of war and proximity to the frontlines. While there are people in need all across Syria, Idlib and Aleppo governorates contain the highest numbers of people in need (see [Humanitarian situation](#)).

- 2.4.8 In the majority of the major towns, cities and governorates in Syria, people are, in most cases, likely to face a real risk of Article 3 harm as a result of the humanitarian crisis. However, decision makers must consider all of a person's circumstances when making an assessment. These may include age, gender, health and available support, for example return might be possible for a person with a reasonable income or family support to Damascus where food and accommodation is available, but at inflated prices (see [Humanitarian situation](#)).

[Back to Contents](#)

d. Security situation

- 2.4.9 Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive applies only to civilians, who must be genuine non-combatants and not those who are party to the conflict. This could include former combatants who have genuinely and permanently renounced armed activity.
- 2.4.10 Since the conflict in Syria began in 2011, a number of different armed groups have taken part in hostilities both for and against the State's armed forces. Throughout the 9 years of hostilities, government forces (see [Pro-government forces](#)) have besieged opposition-held areas, blocked humanitarian aid, shelled areas controlled by armed opposition, or where the opposition are present, and inflicted heavy loss of life and destruction of property. There have been reports of pro-government forces carrying out indiscriminate airstrikes which repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists. The use of chemical weapons by the regime forces has also been reported (see [Nature and level of violence](#)).
- 2.4.11 The Syrian army has regained control of virtually all of the country with Idlib being the last province still in opposition hands (see [Timeline](#)).
- 2.4.12 There have also been reports of non-state armed opposition groups continually systematically targeting civilians, journalists and health service providers, including through killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment. Deaths of civilians have been attributed to various different groups including Haya Tharir al-Sham (see [Haya Tharir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#)), Daesh (see [Daesh \(the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, \(ISIL\), ISIS, IS\)](#)) and Syrian Democratic Forces and People's Protection Units (see [Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\) and People's Protection Units \(YPG\)](#)) (see [Nature and level of violence](#)).
- 2.4.13 Across 2019 and the beginning of 2020 the majority of violence has occurred in northwest Syria, particularly in the Idlib, Aleppo and Hama provinces.

However, incidents of conflict continue to occur across all provinces in Syria. Between 1 December 2019 and 31 January 2020 at least 427 civilians were killed, with 90% of the civilian deaths being recorded in areas outside of the control of the government and pro-government forces. However June 2020 recorded the lowest monthly number of civilian deaths (316) since the start of the war. Assessments by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights state that it is highly likely that parties involved in the conflict have failed to follow international humanitarian law obligations of distinguishing civilians from fighters and civilian objects from military objectives, refraining from indiscriminate attacks, ensuring that all attacks are proportional and that precautions are exercised during the conduct of military operations (see [Nature and level of violence](#) and [Statistics](#)).

- 2.4.14 At the beginning of March 2020 a ceasefire between Turkish-backed rebels and Syrian forces supported by Russia came into effect in Idlib governorate reducing the levels of violence there significantly. However, despite the ceasefire there were still reports between March and June 2020 of sporadic violent clashes between various different groups (see [Idlib](#), [Hama](#), [Aleppo](#), and [Damascus](#)). The drop in levels of violence enabled people displaced by the previous conflict to return to certain areas, with at least 180,000 people moving back to Idlib and western Aleppo governorates (see [Humanitarian situation](#)). However, at the time of writing sources suggest that the ceasefire may be close to breaking down with recent reports of airstrikes and shelling taking place (see [Idlib](#)).
- 2.4.15 There continues to be an armed conflict in Syria with the involvement of multiple international, state and non-state actors. The security situation across most of the country is still volatile and unpredictable and, although violence is at its lowest since the start of the civil war, levels remain relatively high but vary from region to region.
- 2.4.16 In general, the levels of violence are such that a person returning to Syria would face a serious and individual threat to their life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence and a breach of Article 15(c). However the security situation in Damascus has improved significantly, with relatively few acts of violence since May 2018, when the government regained control, and it is unlikely that a person could demonstrate that they would be subject to an Article 15(c) risk solely by being present in Damascus, subject to individual assessment of the sliding scale. The same can be said for the As Suwayda', Quneitra and Tartus provinces which have seen relatively low levels of violence across 2019 (see [Nature and level of violence](#)).
- 2.4.17 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#). For guidance on Article 15(b)/Article 3 ECHR and Article 15(c), including consideration of enhanced risk factors, and see the [Asylum Instruction on Humanitarian Protection](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.5 Protection

- 2.5.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of actual or perceived support for the Assad regime, the onus will be on that

person to establish that they are unable to obtain sufficient protection from that regime.

- 2.5.2 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of actual or perceived support for rebel groups, the onus will be on that person to establish that they are unable to obtain sufficient protection from those groups.
- 2.5.3 In most cases it will not be possible for a person to obtain sufficient protection because of the difficulties of moving from one area to another.
- 2.5.4 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.6 Internal relocation

- 2.6.1 Most of the country is now under control of the Syrian government. Networks of checkpoints have been established, severely restricting the freedom of movement of the civilian population. There have been reports of security services extorting residents, requiring bribes to pass through checkpoints to gain access to hospitals and to avoid being apprehended and forced into military service. There have also been reports of government forces using snipers to enforce curfews and amongst other things prevent civilians from fleeing besieged towns (see [Freedom of movement](#)).
- 2.6.2 Idlib is still under control of opposition forces and there may be small pockets of other armed opposition groups in the country and the consistent high level and unpredictability of violence also severely restricts movement throughout the country (see [Freedom of movement](#)).
- 2.6.3 In general, a person is unlikely to be able to internally relocate. This is because the ability to move around the country is very limited, and the unpredictability and scale of potential violence is such that a person cannot reasonably be expected to stay in another part of the country.
- 2.6.4 However the evidence indicates that people with a means of support may now generally return to live in Damascus without facing a real risk of destitution or exposure to indiscriminate violence.
- 2.6.5 However, decision makers must consider all the facts of the case, including the general circumstances prevailing in the intended place of relocation and the circumstances of the person. Where internal relocation is suggested, decision makers must also consider accessibility of the intended place of relocation.
- 2.6.6 For further guidance on internal relocation see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.7 Certification

- 2.7.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

2.7.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

Country information

Section 3 updated: 15 July 2020

3. Background

3.1 Difficulties with obtaining reliable information

3.1.1 Due to the ongoing civil war in Syria, information is hard to come by and sometimes inconsistent. In 2014 the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) described Syria as the most dangerous place for journalists in the world¹. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) listed Syria as 174 out of 180 in their 2020 World Press Freedom Index (1 being most free, 180 being least free) published in April 2020².

3.1.2 RSF stated the following in regard to the conditions for journalism in Syria in April 2019:

‘The risk of arrest, abduction or death make journalism extremely dangerous and difficult in Syria. At least 10 journalists were killed in 2018, of whom three were the victims of murders in unclear circumstances that were never solved. The updating of civil registers have confirmed that five journalists also died in recent years while held in Bashar al-Assad’s jails. Since the start of 2018, dozens of journalists have had to flee the advance of government troops, especially into the southwestern Ghouta and Deraa regions, because they feared arrest. Journalists are the targets of intimidation by all parties to the conflict – by the Syrian military and its allies as well as the various armed opposition groups including Turkish-backed forces, Kurdish forces and radical Islamist groups such as Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al Sham. Of the new Syrian media created by citizen-journalists shortly after the start of the uprising in 2011, few have survived. The Syrian government gave itself a new tool for cracking down on the Internet in March 2018 by creating special cyber-crime courts.’³

3.1.3 Since June 2012, most western diplomats were declared ‘persona non grata’⁴. Reporting access to the country is therefore very limited.

[Back to Contents](#)

3.2 Circumstances that lead to the civil war

3.2.1 The BBC reported in an article published on 25 February 2019 that:

‘Even before the conflict began, many Syrians were complaining about high unemployment, corruption and a lack of political freedom under President Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father, Hafez, after he died in 2000.

‘In March 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in the southern city of Deraa, inspired by the "Arab Spring" in neighbouring countries.

‘When the government used deadly force to crush the dissent, protests demanding the president’s resignation erupted nationwide.

¹ CPJ, ‘Syria, the most dangerous place for journalists’, 13 March 2014, [url](#)

² Reporters Without Borders, ‘Syria’, April 2020, [url](#)

³ Reporters Without Borders, ‘Syria’, April 2020, [url](#)

⁴ Reuters, ‘Syria lists 17 envoys as “persona non grata”’, 5 June 2012, [url](#)

'The unrest spread and the crackdown intensified. Opposition supporters took up arms, first to defend themselves and later to rid their areas of security forces. Mr Assad vowed to crush what he called "foreign-backed terrorism".

'The violence rapidly escalated and the country descended into civil war.'⁵

[Back to Contents](#)

3.3 Timeline

3.3.1 The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) 'is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries.'⁶

3.3.2 In February 2020 CFR published an article entitled 'Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror'. Below are extracts from the article giving a broad outline of the conflict in Syria as it unfolded and what the situation on the ground is at time of writing:

'The Arab Spring began in December 2010 with the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor decrying corruption. His act prompted protests in Tunisia, and then across the Middle East and North Africa, which forced longtime strongmen in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen to step down. Inspired by these previously unthinkable events, fifteen boys in the southwestern city of Deraa, Syria, spray-painted on a school wall: "The people want the fall of the regime." They were arrested and tortured. Demonstrators who rallied behind them clashed with police, and protests spread. Many protesters were calling for something more modest than regime change: the release of political prisoners, an end to the half-century-old state of emergency, greater freedoms, and an end to corruption. [...] Assad responded to protesters immediately, offering just token reforms while directing security services to put down the protests with force.

'Anti-regime protests soon spread from Deraa to major cities such as Damascus, Hama, and Homs. Events in Deraa offered a preview of what was to come elsewhere: The Syrian army fired on unarmed protesters and carried out mass arrests, both targeting dissidents and indiscriminately sweeping up men and boys, human rights monitors reported. Torture and extrajudicial executions were frequently reported at detention centers. Then, in late April 2011, the Syrian army brought in tanks, laying siege to Deraa. The civilian death toll mounted and residents were cut off from food, water, medicine, telephones, and electricity for eleven days. Amid international condemnation, the regime offered some concessions, but it also repeated the Deraa response in other places where there were protests, at far greater length and cost, leading some regime opponents to take up arms.

'[...] In July 2011, defectors from Assad's army announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and soon after they began to receive shelter in

⁵ BBC, 'Why is there a war in Syria?', 25 February 2019, [url](#)

⁶ CFR, 'About CFR', nd, [url](#)

Turkey. Yet the FSA, outgunned by the regime, struggled to bring its loose coalition under centralized command and control. FSA militias often didn't coordinate their operations and sometimes had competing interests, reflecting their varied regional backers. With resources scarce, they preyed at times on the very populations they were charged with protecting.⁷

3.3.3 The same source further stated:

'Both Assad's forces and rebel groups have regularly targeted civilians in areas outside of their control. The deaths of some 1,400 civilians from chemical weapons deployed by the Assad regime in the summer of 2013 mobilized world powers to dismantle the regime's chemical arsenal. However, in the years since, the Syrian government has employed devastating conventional arms that have also caused massive civilian casualties.

'The regime has made regular use of sieges and aerial bombardment. These collective-punishment tactics serve dual purposes, analysts say: they raise the costs of resistance to civilians so that they will pressure rebels to acquiesce, and they prevent local committees from offering a viable alternative to the regime's governance. In 2018, the UN humanitarian agency said more than one million people lived in areas that were besieged or otherwise beyond the reach of aid.

'Despite a UN Security Council resolution in 2014 aimed at securing humanitarian aid routes, aid became politicized as Assad would grant UN convoys permission to distribute food and medicine in government-held areas while denying them access to rebel-held areas, and rights advocates charged the regime with targeting medical facilities and personnel.⁸

3.3.4 The CFR report continued:

'The regime captured the last rebel-held enclave of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 after a prolonged siege and bombardment. The city, Syria's economic powerhouse, had been contested since 2012, and its capture marked a stark reversal of fortune for the opposition; in 2013, rebels had nearly encircled the regime-controlled western part of the city. But the campaign also demonstrated how dependent Assad has become on his foreign backers—both the Russian air force and Shiite militias—as his own forces have weakened.

'Scores of civilians were massacred in the battle's last days in what a UN spokesperson called "a complete meltdown of humanity." With their defeat in Aleppo, rebels were isolated to northern Idlib province, parts of the south, and small enclaves around Damascus and Homs.

'[...] The civil war entered a new stage in October 2019 after U.S. President Donald J. Trump removed the roughly one thousand U.S. troops supporting Kurdish fighters on the Syria-Turkey border. The surprise move cleared the way for Turkey's Erdogan to launch a military operation there. Aiming to push Kurdish forces away from the border, Turkish troops and their Syrian rebel allies seized towns and villages, causing hundreds of thousands of

⁷ CFR, 'Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror', 19 February 2020, [url](#)

⁸ CFR, 'Syria's Civil War: The Descent into Horror', 19 February 2020, [url](#)

people to flee. The SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] turned to the Syrian government for help, allowing regime soldiers to re-enter areas that had been held by the Kurds for years. Russian troops also entered the region to support the Syrian government.

‘[...] Assad’s forces, with the assistance of his foreign backers, have besieged and bombarded the rebels’ final redoubts in Syria’s northwest, imperilling hundreds of thousands of civilians. By December 2019, the regime and its allies advanced into Idlib, where Russia-backed forces launched a devastating air campaign and clashes resumed between the regime and Turkish forces seeking to protect their opposition posts in the area. A cease-fire agreement signed by Ankara and Moscow in January quickly collapsed as regime forces captured cities along the strategically significant M5 highway, which connects Damascus and Aleppo. Hostilities between the regime and the Turks intensified in February 2020, when Syrian government forces killed Turkish troops in direct combat for the first time, spurring Turkey to retaliate with strikes against dozens of regime targets. The fighting has endangered Idlib’s population, which ballooned to three million as government authorities offered rebel fighters and civilians the choice of surrendering—risking conscription or arrest—or being bused north to the province. The rising violence has resulted in the war’s largest mass displacement to date, forcing some nine hundred thousand people out of their homes.’⁹

- 3.3.5 On 2 March 2020, the UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria published a report which covered the events between 11 July 2019 and 10 January 2020. The report’s summary stated:

‘Since the start of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, hostilities show little sign of abating in several parts of the country with a large number of State and non-State actors participating across different theatres of conflict. Multiple, rapidly shifting alliances among these parties continue to create volatility and power vacuums that facilitate violations of international law. The absence of an effective peace process, coupled with the failure of conflicting parties to provide unfettered access to humanitarian actors and independent monitors, renders distant the prospect of improving the immediate protection environment for civilians.’¹⁰

- 3.3.6 For timelines of events Syria in general and the conflict, see the [BBC’s Syria profile timeline](#)¹¹, [Reuters’ eight years of fire and blood timeline](#)¹² and [CNN’s Syrian Civil War Fast Facts timeline](#)¹³.

[Back to Contents](#)

3.4 Situation as at end of June 2020

- 3.4.1 The New York Times reported on 30 June 2020 that ‘After almost a decade of violence, the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad has mostly won the

⁹ CFR, ‘Syria’s Civil War: The Descent into Horror’, 19 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰ UN COI, ‘Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria’, (p1), 2 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹ BBC, ‘Syria profile – Timeline’, 14 January 2019, [url](#)

¹² Reuters, ‘Timeline: Syria’s eight years of fire and blood’, 15 March 2019, [url](#)

¹³ CNN, ‘Syrian Civil War Fast Facts’, 11 October 2019, [url](#)

country's civil war, aided by Russia and Iran and their proxies. But with Turkey increasing its own forces inside northwestern Syria, with up to 10,000 troops around Idlib province, a sort of military stalemate has taken hold since March in parts of the country.¹⁴

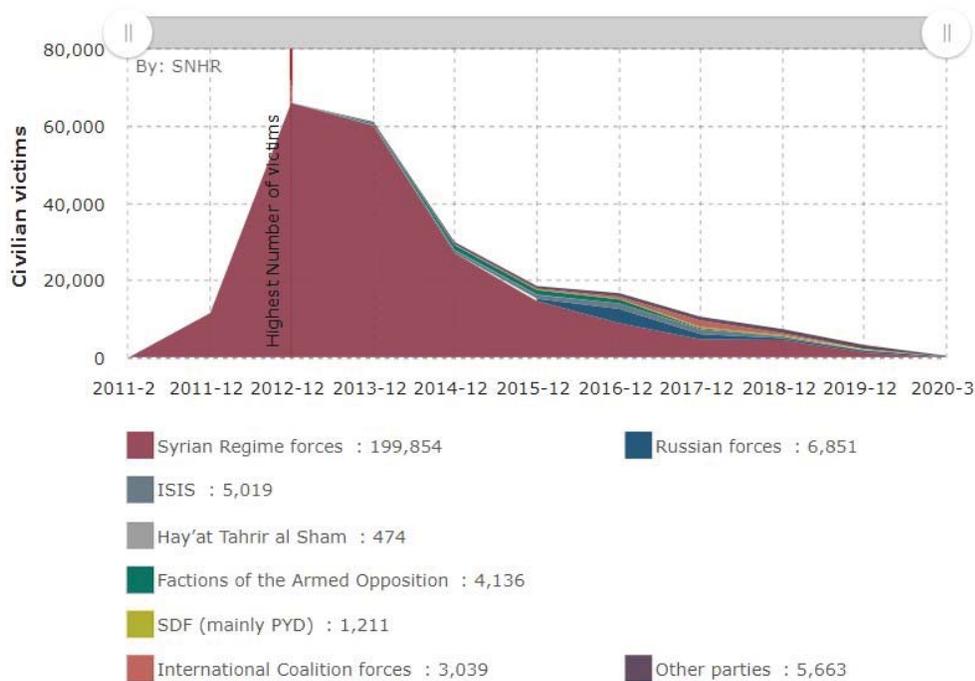
[Back to Contents](#)

3.5 Statistics

3.5.1 In January 2014 the United Nations (UN) acknowledged that it had stopped updating its death toll estimates for the Syrian conflict, citing that due to limited access on the ground in the country it was no longer able to verify the sources of information it used to produce its estimates^{15,16}. Since then, other organisations have taken the lead in reporting on death tolls in Syria including the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights \(SOHR\)](#) and the [Violations Documentation Centre \(VDC\)](#) in Syria.

3.5.2 The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) 'founded in June 2011, and works on documenting human rights violations in Syria'¹⁷ produced the following graph. The graph shows the trend of civilian deaths throughout the 9 years of conflict as well as which actor was responsible for them. For information about the way SNHR's collects and documents data see its [working methodology document](#).

Distribution of the toll of civilian victims killed at the hands of the parties to the conflict over the years.



18

¹⁴ New York Times, 'At Syrian Aid Summit, ... 'Downward Spiral', 30 June 2020, [url](#)

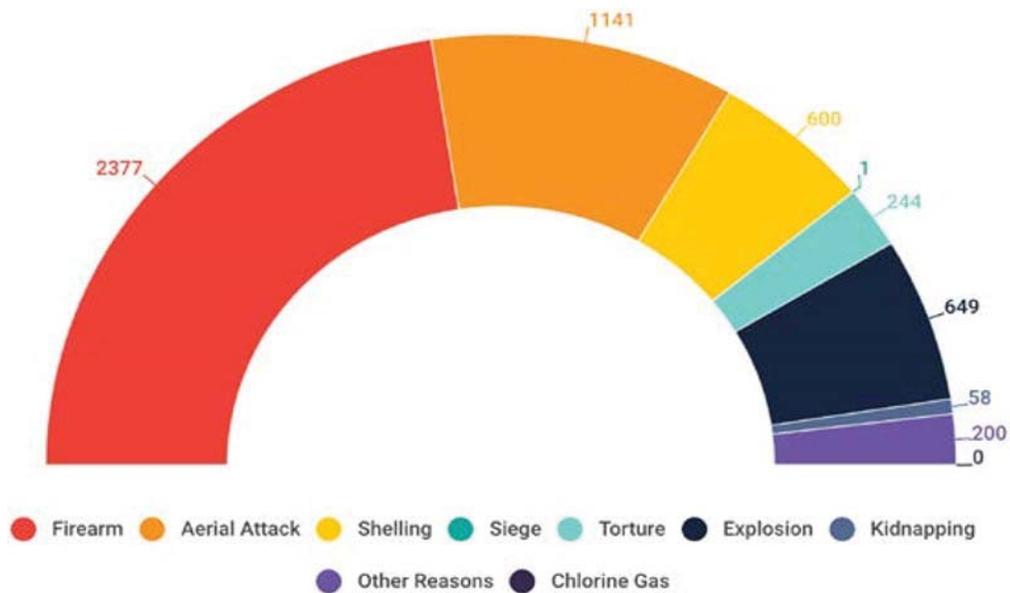
¹⁵ The Atlantic, 'The U.N. has stopped counting the deaths in Syria', 7 January 2014, [url](#)

¹⁶ Al Jazeera, 'UN abandons death count in Syria, citing inability to verify toll', 7 January 2014, [url](#)

¹⁷ SNHR, 'About us', nd, [url](#)

¹⁸ SNHR, '226,247 civilians were killed in Syria from March 2011 to March 2020, nd, [url](#)

- 3.5.3 The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), ‘a UK-based monitoring group with a network of sources on the ground’¹⁹ in Syria stated in January 2020 that nearly 585,000 people had been killed since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, of which 115,490 were civilians²⁰.
- 3.5.4 A report published in February 2020 by the VDC in Syria, which was ‘established in June 2011 to ensure careful and independent documentation of all kinds of human rights violations in Syria’²¹, stated that since the civil war began in mid-March 2011 until January 2020 there had been a total of 212,250 battle-related deaths (i.e. as a direct result of violence/conflict) in Syria. Of this 212,250, 60.77% (128,976) were civilians and the remaining 39.23% (83,274) were non-civilians²².
- 3.5.5 In January 2020 the VDC in Syria published a statistical report on battle-related casualties in Syria in 2019. The report stated that during 2019 there were a total of 5,270 casualties, of which 4,876 were documented by full name and 394 were registered as unknown²³.
- 3.5.6 The report further stated that ‘the largest number of documented deaths took place in Idlib (1,435), followed by Hama (722) and Aleppo (536). 2,577 deaths were documented in other governorates’²⁴ and that ‘the number of civilian deaths reached 2828 while the number of non-civilian deaths was 2,442.’²⁵
- 3.5.7 The same report produced the following graphic on the causes of death during 2019²⁶.



¹⁹ BBC, ‘Why is there a war in Syria?’, 25 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁰ SOHR, ‘Nearly 585,000...killed since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution’, 4 January 2020, [url](#)

²¹ VDC in Syria, ‘Our Story’, undated, [url](#)

²² VDC in Syria, ‘Monthly Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria – Jan 2020’, (p2), 7 Feb 2020, [url](#)

²³ VDC in Syria, ‘Annual Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria - 2019’, (p4) 17 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁴ VDC in Syria, ‘Annual Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria - 2019’, (p5) 17 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁵ VDC in Syria, ‘Annual Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria - 2019’, (p5) 17 January 2020, [url](#)

²⁶ VDC in Syria, ‘Annual Statistical Report on Casualties in Syria - 2019’, (p6) 17 January 2020, [url](#)

- 3.5.8 The SOHR reported on 1 July 2020 that 316 persons were killed in June 2020, 'the lowest monthly civilian death toll ever'.²⁷
- 3.5.9 Different sources report in different ways the number of fatalities caused by the conflict. Some sources distinguish between the number of civilians and combatants killed whereas others do not, while others focus only on battle-related deaths. It should be noted that variations in figures could be due to the complex nature of the conflict and different organisations' inability to access, verify and document data.

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 4 updated: 15 July 2020

4. Protagonists

4.1 Pro-government forces

a) Syrian forces

4.1.1 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

'Syria's armed forces and security services (Mukhabarat) have long been a vital source of the Assad family's control of Syria. But after suffering thousands of casualties and desertions, they have come to rely on the support of local irregulars and foreign militiamen, as well as Russian air power, to besiege and bombard opposition-held territory, recapture that territory, and restore control.

'[...] Alawis, members of Assad's sect, make up much of the army's top echelons; other minorities are also disproportionately represented among the officer corps. Sunni Arabs, who may comprise nearly two-thirds of the army, are also represented. Conscription is mandatory for all Syrians, and fighting-age Syrian men have been swept up at government checkpoints.

'[...] The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) may have as few as twenty-five thousand troops that can be deployed to clear and hold territory. Its overall pre-war strength of some 220,000 active-duty troops has been diminished through casualties of conflict or defections. It has come to rely on militias of regime loyalists that range from groups of neighborhood thugs known as shabeeha (derived from the word "ghost") to the more professional National Defense Forces, composed of military reservists.

'The air force is perhaps the most potent wing of the military, with more than 260 aircraft plus attack helicopters, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a London-based think tank. The regime has used air power to target not just rebel formations but also populated centers and civilian institutions protected under international law, including hospitals, often with crude barrel bombs.

'Such air strikes, along with chemical weapons attacks, have drawn investigations into violations of international humanitarian law. Though the regime gave up some of its most lethal chemical weapons in 2013 amid

²⁷ SOHR, 'The lowest monthly civilian death toll ever', 1 July 2020, [url](#).

threats of U.S. intervention, allegations of chlorine attacks persisted, and a sarin attack attributed to the regime in April 2017 prompted U.S. reprisal.’²⁸

- 4.1.2 In a December 2019 report entitled ‘Syria: Actors’, citing various sources the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) stated that:

‘Current estimations of the strength of the SAA vary, with some military experts assessing that the army is one quarter of its pre-war size, while others estimate that only one-fifth of the army is left, which is attributed to defections, loss of life and emigration because of the conflict. According to a 2017 estimation by Jane’s IHS Markit, the SAA consisted of about 20 regular SAA brigades, half dozen Tiger Forces regiments and 20 Republican Guard brigades that would amount to 50,000 personnel, excluding air force and air defense force. The front-line fighting strength of the army was estimated to be of 45,000. Christopher Kozak, a Senior Analyst for the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), estimated the strength of the SAA in January 2017 to be of around 100,000 soldiers who are “mainly ill-equipped and poorly trained conscripts”.

‘The war has affected the SAA. The army has decreased in size, the quality of the troops is low and its combat capabilities remain limited. Despite its shortcomings, the SAA is regarded as central to the Syrian government’s survival, has maintained its operational capability and “has remained the central platform for coordinating and providing logistical support to the various pro-regime forces deployed around the country”.’²⁹

[Back to Contents](#)

b) Pro-government militias

- 4.1.3 In December 2019 EASO, citing various sources, stated:

‘After the beginning of the civil war in 2011, the Syrian government organized a network of auxiliary pro-government militias to supplement the army’s combat capabilities and structural deficiencies. The use of militias in Syria is legally possible under Article 10 of the Military Service law, which permits the use of “auxiliary forces” and “other forces that are necessitated by circumstances” to fight alongside the SAA.

‘The pro-government militias were at first organised as “popular committees” from local communities controlled or loyal to the regime to defend their towns and neighborhoods against opposition forces, and comprised mainly of Shia and Alawite individuals. Additionally, the regime also relied on a network of criminal gangs of Alawites linked with the Assad family [...] who were mobilised and armed to suppress the early protests.

‘[...] By 2012, the government took steps to consolidate these militias under its control and incorporated them under an umbrella network set up with Iran’s assistance called the National Defense Forces (NDF). [...] The NDF were reported to be “quite inclusive of all the groups that are willing to fight on the side of Syrian government”, for instance incorporating in their ranks Sunnis from Damascus and Aleppo.

²⁸ CFR, ‘Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War’, last updated 28 April 2017, [url](#)

²⁹ EASO, ‘Syria: Actors’, (p26), December 2019, [url](#)

[...] Estimations of NDF's fighting strength vary with sources indicating that during their peak in 2014-2015 they had between 80,000 to 100,000 fighters, while figures from 2017 assess their capacity to be more than 100,000 soldiers. At least one battalion of about 1,000 – 1,500 women was reported to serve in the NDF, mainly in non-combat positions.³⁰

- 4.1.4 In July 2019, the Middle East Institute published a report entitled 'The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth'. It stated the following in regard to pro-government militias:

[the Syrian government in Damascus] enabled the proliferation of pro-government militias through the passage of 2013's Legislative Decree 55, which allowed for contracting private companies to protect gas and oil infrastructure. Some militias were affiliated with established governmental bodies, such as the Air Intelligence-affiliated Tiger Forces from Hama. The Tiger Forces leveraged the prestige and power of the Air Intelligence to unite armored and artillery units from the 11th and 4th Divisions with the remnants of the Special Forces units and a number of local, largely Alawite, militias that had formed in Hama and Homs.

'Other groups were formed by wealthy businessmen connected to the government, like the Jaber brothers' Desert Hawks, a Latakia-based private militia that enjoyed the backing of the Republican Guard until it was forced to disband in 2017. Many more militias mobilized within key loyalist communities, like the Aleppo Palestinian Liwa-al-Wuds and Damascus Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command. These local militias were used both to secure their immediate surroundings (as was the case with Damascus-based Palestinian groups) and as infantry support on farther-flung fronts. (Liwa al-Quds has a long history of fighting in Deir ez-Zor and Homs, for example).³¹

- 4.1.5 In October 2018 The Middle East Institute also produced a report entitled '[The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia](#)' which focussed on the various different groups that make up the Tiger forces, as well as its history and origins³².

[Back to Contents](#)

c) Hezbollah

- 4.1.6 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

'The Lebanese Shia movement was established during the country's civil war and expanded its support by putting up a guerrilla resistance to Israel in subsequent years. Its involvement in Syria's civil war, though, has implicated the group in Assad's killing of civilians and political repression, eroding its popularity in the Arab world. In Syria, it has galvanized a mostly Sunni opposition that now sees Hezbollah as a sectarian partisan and a beachhead of Iranian domination of the country.

[...] Hezbollah has sent military advisors, and eventually, its elite forces and ground troops to fight in Syria. Its forces in Syria numbered between four

³⁰ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p33-34), December 2019, [url](#)

³¹ Middle East Institute, 'The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth', 18 July 2019, [url](#)

³² Middle East Institute, 'The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia', October 2018, [url](#)

thousand and eight thousand at the start of 2016, says IISS, and, with Syria's infantry weakened, they have been vital to rolling back opposition forces and holding territory cleared by Russian air strikes.

'[...] Like its Syrian and Iranian allies, it has suffered from heavy battlefield losses, and estimates of fatalities range upwards from a thousand. [...] Hezbollah militants have primarily fought Sunni opposition forces, particularly along the southwestern border Syria shares with Lebanon.'³³

4.1.7 EASO stated in December 2019 that:

'Hezbollah fighters assisted the Syrian government in military operations in many areas of the country since 2012, although they confirmed their presence only in 2013. They were involved in defending or recapturing of Druze, Shia, Alawite, Sunni, and Christian villages around the Syrian city al-Qusayr, as well as several Shia dominated suburbs of Damascus like Sayyida Zeinab.

'As of June 2018, the number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria was estimated to be between 7,000 and 10,000, the majority of which were reported to be deployed along the Lebanese-Syrian border in areas inhabited by Shias and near their headquarters in Lebanon. According to Christopher Kozak of ISW [Institute for the Study of War], Lebanese Hezbollah was the primary actor securing the Syrian-Lebanese Border. Presence of Hezbollah fighters in other areas of the country, including around the cities of Homs and Damascus and in Deir Ez-Zor governorate has also been reported.'³⁴

[Back to Contents](#)

d) Foreign Shia militias

4.1.8 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

'Iranian military advisors and Hezbollah militants have been reinforced by other Shia militants, primarily from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Some of the Iraqi militias are offshoots of the Popular Mobilization Fronts fighting to retake Iraqi territory captured by the Islamic State. The Afghan fighters are largely refugees who have long resided in Iran and were recruited by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps with offers of citizenship or payoffs.

'Their original aim was to defend Shia holy sites that they believe would be wiped out if Sunni militants toppled Assad's government. Foremost among them is the tomb of Sayyida Zainab, the prophet Mohammed's granddaughter, in a southern Damascus suburb. But as pro-Assad Syrian forces have been depleted by defections and casualties, these foreigners have come to a broader defense of the Assad regime, ranging across Syria's frontlines against opposition groups.

'Their ranks have been estimated to be as high as twenty-five thousand. They have proven vital to the regime's ground fighting, particularly in the battle for Aleppo. They have primarily clashed with Sunni-led opposition

³³ CFR, 'Who's Who in Syria's Civil War', last updated 28 April 2017, [url](#)

³⁴ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p34), December 2019, [url](#)

forces, particularly over the contested, populous western spine of the country.³⁵

4.1.9 EASO stated in December 2019:

‘Apart from the Syrian pro-government militias, Shia foreign fighters were mobilised by Iran and sent to fight in Syria on the side of the Assad government. The most prominent groups included the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade, as well as various Iraqi Shia militias that are members of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and fighters from Yemen. Estimation[s] regarding the strength of these militias vary considerably with some sources stating that the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade together account for 15,000 fighters, while others put the total number of Shia foreign fighters in Syria from Afghanistan, Yemen and Iraq to be between 8,000 and 12,000.

‘During the first half of 2019, Iraqi Shia militias were reported to be present primarily in the eastern parts of Syria and take part in cross-border operations against ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – also known as Daesh] on the western bank of the Euphrates River. Iraqi Shia militias were also located in around the Al Tanf Garrison, near the Jordanian border area occupied by US forces.

‘Sources published in 2018 reported that Iran has established the Local Defense Forces (LDF) which include local militias that operated outside of official military structures and were responsible for recruiting 90,000 local Syrian fighters since 2017. In April 2017, the LDF were formally integrated in the Syrian Armed Forces, although sources noted that they still reported to Iran, which continued to support them.

‘Palestinian militias also supported the government military in the conflict. The most prominent of these militias are Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) which existed since before the uprising, the SAA-affiliated Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) and the Liwa al-Quds (the Quds Brigade). Liwa al-Quds is regarded as the largest Palestinian pro-government militia with an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 fighters.³⁶

[Back to Contents](#)

e) Iran

4.1.10 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

‘Syria is Iran’s main ally in the Arab world, and Tehran entered the conflict fearing that any successor to the Assad regime led by the country’s Sunni majority would align with its rival Saudi Arabia. As the civil war has dragged on, its fears have shifted to the threat of anarchy in Syria, which would foster conditions in which Sunni jihadi groups could thrive. It has focused most of its efforts in the country’s west, where opposition groups most directly threatened the regime.

³⁵ CFR, ‘Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War’, last updated 28 April 2017, [url](#)

³⁶ EASO, ‘Syria: Actors’, (p35-36), December 2019, [url](#)

[...] Iran has helped keep the Assad regime economically afloat even while it was bearing the weight of international sanctions for its nuclear program. Early on it dispatched military advisors, and later, members of its elite Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard soldiers, their first major deployment abroad. They numbered up to two thousand at the start of 2016, according to IISS. Like Hezbollah, Iran had concealed the depth of its military involvement until mounting funerals made it apparent to the public. It is reported to have suffered several hundred casualties.³⁷

4.1.11 In December 2019 EASO stated:

‘Since 2012, Iran has supplied Assad’s troops with IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] advisors, a network of Shia foreign fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah and various militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Iran has also played an important role in the foundation of the Syrian pro-government militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), which were formed under IRGC supervision.

[...] US Ambassador James Jeffrey, the Special Representative for Syrian Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition Against Daesh assessed in a May 2019 statement that Iran retained thousands of IRGC-QF [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force] advisors in Syria, which provide leadership for over 10,000 Iranian backed proxies from third countries. The US Congress-appointed Syria Study Group noted in a September 2019 report that the Iranian military presence in Syria was at its height in 2015 and has since decreased gradually.

‘According to the Israeli chief of staff Gadi Esenkot, 3000 members of the IRGC were deployed to Syria by 2016 and Iran was “building a force of up to 100,000 Shia fighters from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq”.

[...] Apart from providing the Syrian government with troops and training, Iran has also established military command centres and deployed advanced weapons systems in Syria, including long-range missiles, drones, radar systems and air defense capabilities.³⁸

[Back to Contents](#)

f) Russia

4.1.12 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

‘Moscow’s ties to Syria long predate the civil war, and it provided the Assad regime with a diplomatic shield at the United Nations after the start of the uprising. Then, in December 2015, it intervened militarily, focusing on supporting Assad’s campaign in the west and north, particularly in its bid to recapture rebel-held eastern Aleppo.

[...] Russia has deployed fighter jets and attack helicopters in population centers, providing government-aligned ground forces close air support to retake territory.

‘Activists and monitoring groups have accused Russia of bombarding such population centers as east Aleppo as part of a scorched-earth strategy

³⁷ CFR, ‘Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War’, last updated 28 April 2017, [url](#)

³⁸ EASO, ‘Syria: Actors’, (p4-5), December 2019, [url](#)

meant to deplete rebels and encourage civilians to evacuate or capitulate. Allegations include the use of bunker-buster bombs, which wreak particular destruction on shelters and medical facilities built underground to withstand bombardment.³⁹

- 4.1.13 The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) stated in a November 2018 briefing that Russia ‘retains a significant military presence in Syria and continues to participate in airstrikes against opposition strongholds.’⁴⁰

[Back to Contents](#)

4.2 Non-state armed groups and opposition forces

g) Free Syrian Army (FSA)

- 4.2.1 The April 2017 report published by the CFR stated:

‘The FSA was the main group to emerge when the regime first cracked down on protestors. Though it was led by defected army officers and comprised many former Syrian army conscripts, its name was something of a misnomer: With just scarce resources, its leadership could never centralize command and control over the many militias that had affiliated with it, and many of those groups began operating as criminal outfits.

‘[...] The FSA received light arms, and later, artillery, including antiaircraft equipment, from its regional backers. It also received some nonlethal aid from the United States, but Washington has often been reluctant to arm even the groups it has vetted out of fear that heavy weaponry might fall into the hands of Islamist and jihadi groups.’⁴¹

- 4.2.2 In October 2019, the Turkish state news agency Anadolu stated:

‘The FSA formed a legitimate military backbone of the opposition with the Syrian flag and was positioned as the military wing of the Syrian Provisional Government established in March 2013.

‘The FSA became active in most of the country until 2015 and fought on the fronts of Aleppo-Idlib, Raqqa-Deyrizor-Haseke, Hama-Latakia, Homs, and Damascus-Dera-Kuneytra-Suveyda.

‘The support of the Russian and Iranian-backed foreign terrorist groups to the Bashar Assad regime caused the FSA to lose strength on all fronts in 2016.’⁴²

- 4.2.3 The same source explained that on 30 December 2017, 30 groups that were affiliated to the Free Syrian Army united under the Syrian National Army (see [SNA](#))⁴³.

[Back to Contents](#)

h) National Liberation Front (NLF)

³⁹ CFR, ‘Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War’, last updated 28 April 2017, [url](#)

⁴⁰ EPRS, ‘Russia in the Middle East’, (p3), November 2018, [url](#)

⁴¹ CFR, ‘Who’s Who in Syria’s Civil War’, last updated 28 April 2017, [url](#)

⁴² Anadolu Agency, ‘Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army’, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴³ Anadolu Agency, ‘Free Syrian Army transforms into Syrian National Army’, 9 October 2019, [url](#)

4.2.4 In February 2020 the BBC stated that the National Liberation Front is 'a Turkish-backed alliance that includes hardline Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, as well as several groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - a force considered more "moderate" by Western powers.'⁴⁴

4.2.5 In December 2019 EASO stated that:

'The NLF was formed in 2018 by rebel armed groups in the Idlib area. The group uses the brand of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – the umbrella armed group formed by the anti-government opposition in 2011 and [...] is made up of moderate but also Islamist factions. These factions include:

- Feilaq al-Sham, considered the main actor in the NLF and Turkey's closest rebel partner. According to a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood official interviewed by the International Crisis Group, Feilaq al-Sham was founded by members of the Muslim Brotherhood but it takes its own decisions. It is present in the Idlib area and especially in Turkey-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate. The group maintains working relations with HTS [[Hayat Tharir al-Sham](#)]. Its leader, Fadlallah al-Hajji, is also the commander of the NLF.
- Ahrar al-Sham: is a Salafi armed group that controls local communities in southern Idlib and northern Hama countryside. An HTS rival, the group lost ground to HTS following clashes in the beginning of 2019. The group was reportedly concentrated in Jabal al Zawiyah; the Jabal al-Arbaeen area, including Ariha; and around Maaret al-Nouman.
- The Free Idlib Army: an alliance of formerly Western-supported factions that has a long history of using the FS brand.
- Jaish al-Ahrar: an Ahrar al-Sham splinter group.
- Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki: an Islamist faction that is based near Aleppo and has repeatedly changed sides between rival insurgent groups. Clashes with HTS in January 2019 significantly impacted its capacity and territorial control. In March 2019, the group dissolved and remaining fighters joining factions of the SNA.

'Several sources indicate that Turkey provides weapons and salaries to NLF, although the support received is not considered to be substantial by its fighters. Following clashes with HTS that took place in the beginning of 2019, NLF lost control over territory in Idlib and subsequently ceded the civil administration and surrounding areas in Idlib to HTS following an agreement between the groups.'⁴⁵

4.2.6 The BBC further stated that 'In October [2019] NLF merged with other rebel groups in northern Syria and rebranded itself to become part of the Syrian National Army (SNA) under the command of the Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) Ministry of Defence.'⁴⁶

[Back to Contents](#)

⁴⁴ BBC, 'Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?', 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁵ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p54-55), December 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁶ BBC, 'Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?', 18 February 2020, [url](#)

i) Syrian National Army (SNA)

4.2.7 In 2016 Turkish armed forces and affiliated local armed groups launched an operation called Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo governorate to fight Daesh and contain any Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) gains in the area⁴⁷. In December 2019 EASO stated:

'By the end of 2017, Turkey had incorporated the armed groups that fought alongside them in the Euphrates Shield operation into the Syrian National Army under the formal supervision of the so called Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence. [...] The factions that comprise the SNA are hostile towards the Syrian government present in south Aleppo governorate and SDF [[Syrian Democratic Forces](#)] forces controlling Manbij, but follow Turkey's order in conducting military operations against either.'⁴⁸

4.2.8 A Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) report on the civil war written by Middle East expert Aron Lund published in December 2018 stated:

'Since 2017 Turkey has tried to establish a single chain of command by herding them [armed groups] into a loose, FSA-branded coalition known as the Syrian National Army, which operates under Turkish oversight. Prominent member factions include:

- The Sultan Murad Brigade: an Arab-Turkmen group from Aleppo.
- The Moutassem Brigade: formerly U.S.-backed rebels.
- Ahrar Al Sharqiya: an Islamist faction from eastern Syria.
- The Shamiya Front: Islamists from Aleppo and Azaz, linked to border smuggling.'⁴⁹

4.2.9 In December 2019 EASO, citing various sources, stated:

'On 4 October 2019, the merger between the NLF and the Syrian National Army (SNA) [...] was announced by the so called Syrian Interim Government. The union brings together more than 40 armed opposition groups under the command of the Syrian National Army which reported by Syria expert Charles Lister to be under the "near-total control of Turkey's Ministry of Defense and National Intelligence Organization (MIT)". The total strength of the combined forces was estimated by Lister to be around 35,000 fighters.

'Representatives of the Syrian opposition however announced that the new SNA would be comprised of seven corps including 80,000 fighters. The military leadership of the new formed armed group will be ensured by Major General Salim Idriss - Minister of Defense for the so called Syrian Interim Government - and chief of staff of the SNA, Brigadier General Adnan al-Ahmad - deputy chief of staff from opposition controlled areas in Aleppo countryside and colonel Fadlallah al-Hajji – the leader of NLF and deputy chief of staff for the Idlib region.'⁵⁰

⁴⁷ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p57), December 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁸ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p57), December 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁹ FOI, 'Syria's Civil War – Government Victory of Frozen Conflict?', (p54) December 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁰ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p56), December 2019, [url](#)

j) Hayat Tharir al-Sham (HTS)

4.2.10 In December 2019 EASO, citing various sources, stated:

‘Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or Organization for the Liberation of the Levant (HTS) [...] formed in 2017 as a coalition of Islamist Sunni anti-government armed groups, through the merger of Jabhat al-Nusra with other smaller factions [...].

‘HTS’s precursor organisation - Jabhat al-Nusra, was formed in Syria in 2011 as an Al Qaeda affiliate within the armed opposition to the Syrian government. The group publicly distanced itself from Al Qaeda since its rebranding as HTS and it maintains that it is “an independent entity that follows no organization or party, al Qaeda or others”, in some instances even arresting Al Qaeda linked individuals to prove its lack of allegiance.’⁵¹

4.2.11 In October 2018, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) stated:

‘HTS remains under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, but the group’s goals have shifted somewhat since announcing its independence from al-Qaeda. Though al-Jolani’s public statements do occasionally suggest broader aims (e.g., “With this spirit... we will not only reach Damascus, but, Allah permitting, Jerusalem will be awaiting our arrival”), the far-reaching “global caliphate” rhetoric favored by al-Qaeda is largely absent in HTS publications today. Instead, the group is locally focused, with its primary objective being the establishment of Islamic rule in Syria via “toppling the criminal [Assad] regime and expelling the Iranian militias.”’⁵²

4.2.12 In February 2020, the BBC stated:

‘HTS has now become one of the strongest militant groups in northern Syria [...].

‘Although analysts are cautious about making numerical estimates, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, an independent analyst, says he believes HTS is the biggest group, which still controls large parts of Idlib province, carries out most of the fighting against government forces and has between 15,000 to 20,000 fighters.

“HTS has also set up and backed a civilian administration in the area - the Salvation Government- that has thousands of employees,” Al-Tamimi says. In a report published in January, the UN gave a slightly lower estimate of between 12,000 and 15,000 fighters in Idlib associated with HTS, including many foreigners.

[...] Syrian government supporters say the numbers are significantly higher.

‘Pro-government politician, Fares Shehabi, told us that he believes there are as many as 100,000 HTS fighters in Idlib. He says HTS is affiliated to al-

⁵¹ EASO, ‘Syria: Actors’, (p49-50), December 2019, [url](#)

⁵² CSIS, ‘Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham – Backgrounder’, 4 October 2018, [url](#)

Qaeda despite its denials. "They carry al-Qaeda flags, they practise al-Qaeda methods," he said.⁵³

4.2.13 For an overview of HTS see the May 2019 [report published by the BBC](#)⁵⁴.

[Back to Contents](#)

k) Daesh

4.2.14 Daesh is also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State (IS).

4.2.15 In the December 2019 EASO report, citing various sources, stated:

'ISIL took advantage of the civil war in Syria and all the "power vacuum created when rebels wrested large parts of the country's north and east from the government of President Bashar al-Assad" to seize strategic territory in Syria and Iraq, and by the end of 2014 was controlling large parts of territory in both countries. By the end of 2018, ISIL's territorial control in Syria was reduced to a small area located the eastern part of the country. On 23 March 2019, SDF forces captured ISIL's last stronghold in Baghouz village, Deir Ez-Zor governorate putting an end to ISIL's territorial control.

'[...] As of July 2019, the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee concerning ISIL, Al-Qaeda and associated and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities assessed that 150 ISIL fighters have remained in the areas south of Damascus and 800 in the governorates of Raqqa and Hasaka. USDOD [US Department of Defense] noted in an August 2019 report that US-led coalition estimations regarding ISIL's strength vary considerably putting the number of ISIL members in Iraq and Syria between 14,000 and 18,000, of whom up to 3000 are foreigners.'⁵⁵

4.2.16 For more information regarding Daesh in Syria see the June 2020 report entitled ['Islamic State in Syria' published by the Danish Immigration Service](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

l) Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and People's Protection Units (YPG)

4.2.17 In December 2019 EASO, citing various sources, stated:

'The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are a Kurdish-led multi-ethnic force comprising of Kurds, Arabs and other ethnic groups created in 2015 to support the US-led coalition in the war against ISIL. The SDF is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) who helped establish the SDF in October 2015, provides its core fighting forces and largely ensures its leadership. According to International Crisis Group, the SDF "generally accepts that the YPG is its core fighting force, which maintains command and control".

'The Kurdish People's Protection Units were established in 2012 as the military wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian branch of the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party]. They are divided into two groups: the

⁵³ BBC, 'Syria: Who's in control of Idlib?', 18 February 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁴ BBC, 'Syria group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and al-Qaeda legacy', 22 May 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁵ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p59-60), December 2019, [url](#)

People’s Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) – and the Women’s Protection Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (YPJ). [...] The stated goal of the YPG and YPJ is to “protect the Kurdish people and their cultural, political, and social existence”.⁵⁶

4.2.18 EASO further stated that:

‘The SDF is led by a General Commander who is allegedly elected by the Military Council, which plays the role of the highest military authority of the SDF and is made up of representatives from each military group in the SDF. [...] According to information provided by the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve, the SDF is a “broad spectrum security apparatus that conducts counterinsurgency operations, [local] patrols, checkpoint operations, detention operations, and clearance patrols”.

‘[...] Various sources estimate SDF’s strength to be around 60,000 fighters. Despite YPG’s media claims that its forces comprise of around 50,000 fighters, Omran Center for Strategic Studies estimated it to be more between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters.’⁵⁷

4.2.19 In a report entitled ‘Syria: Targeting of individuals’ published in March 2020, EASO, citing various sources, stated:

‘SDF was neither in alliance with the Syrian opposition nor the government, but it was nevertheless largely dependent on the GoS [Government of Syria], which funded certain state institutions in the area and paid salaries to state employees. In October 2019, the GoS and the Kurdish-controlled SDF announced an agreement that allowed the GoS troops to be deployed along the border with Turkey to assist Kurdish forces in repelling the Turkish offensive. Christopher Kozak of ISW assessed in November 2019 that the SDF are still in control on the ground in Kurdish-controlled territories and there has not been a governance handover to the Syrian government following the agreement.’⁵⁸

[Back to Contents](#)

m) Turkey

4.2.20 The December 2019 EASO report, citing various sources stated:

‘Turkey has been involved in Syria’s conflict since 2011, supporting opposition groups attempting to remove the Assad government from power such as the Free Syrian Army-branded factions and Islamist groups. As the conflict progressed, Turkey’s priorities changed and while recent sources indicate that it formally still calls for Assad’s removal, it “engaged in a mix of coordination and competition with Russia and Iran (both Assad supporters)” to advance its own interests in the region.

‘[...] Turkey’s main objective in Syria has been to prevent the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) from “establishing an autonomous area along Syria’s northern border with Turkey”. Turkey has been at war with the

⁵⁶ EASO, ‘Syria: Actors’, (p45), December 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁷ EASO, ‘Syria: Actors’, (p45-46), December 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁸ EASO, ‘Syria: Targeting of Individuals’, (p39), 10 March 2020, [url](#)

terrorist designated Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since 1981 and views the YPG as an extension of the PKK and a top threat to Turkish security.

'[...] On 9 October 2019, following the withdrawal of US troops from the region, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring, a military offensive into Kurdish-held territory in northeastern Syria. The stated objectives of the Turkish offensive were to remove YPG and ISIL "terrorist" elements, from along the border area and to establish a "safe zone" 32 km wide and 480 km long inside northern Syria, where it intends to relocate up to two million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey. Turkey's offensive was supported by 14,000 fighters of the opposition armed group, the Syrian National Army (SNA), according to the SNA's own estimates.'⁵⁹

- 4.2.21 An article entitled 'An impending assault on Idlib' published by the Jamestown Foundation in June 2020 stated:

'Turkey has long sought the fall of the Assad regime and has conducted numerous incursions into northern Syria. In February of this year [2020], the deaths of 34 Turkish soldiers resulted in multiple retaliatory bombings of Syrian military positions, labeled "Operation Spring Shield". Shortly after this, Turkey and Turkish-backed forces repelled Russian and Syrian attempts to capture territory and a ceasefire was declared between the two countries in March [2020].

'[...] Turkey wants an area under its control on its southern border to counter any Kurdish insurgency. It has been significantly bolstering its military capabilities, deploying up to 10,000 troops and over 7,000 military vehicles in recent months.'⁶⁰

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 5 updated: 15 July 2020

5. Nature and level of violence

5.1 In general

- 5.1.1 The March 2020 United States Department of State (USSD) report for Human Rights Practices in Syria, covering events in 2019 stated:

'Regime and proregime forces launched major aerial and ground offensives in April [2019] to recapture areas of northwest Syria, killing thousands of civilians and forcing hundreds of thousands more to flee. In December [2019] these forces launched another large-scale assault. The April assault, involving the use of heavy weapons and chemical weapons, and the December assault that involved heavy weapons, devastated the civilian infrastructure in the affected areas and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Syrian and Russian airstrikes repeatedly struck civilian sites, including hospitals, markets, schools, and farms, many of which were included in UN deconfliction lists.

⁵⁹ EASO, 'Syria: Actors', (p9), December 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰ The Jamestown Foundation, 'An Impending Assault on Idlib', 26 June 2020, [url](#)

[...] Reports from NGOs and a September COI [UN Commission of Inquiry] report indicated that in Idlib, hostilities escalated in two major waves, first in mid-February and then again at the end of April, causing hundreds of civilian deaths in airstrikes. The SNHR [Syrian Network for Human Rights] reported 1,432 civilian deaths since April have been documented in Idlib, attributed to Syrian and Russian forces. Aerial and ground offensives throughout the demilitarized zone destroyed civilian infrastructure including “deconflicted” hospitals, schools, marketplaces, and farmlands.

[...] Regime forces reportedly continued to use prohibited chemical weapons and cluster munitions in densely populated areas and attacks against civilian and protected objects, including schools and hospitals. The regime renewed its use of chemical weapons as part of its military advance in Latakia suburbs, with the SNHR documenting one such attack in al Kbaina village on May 19 [2019]. In March the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released a report concluding that a toxic chemical including chlorine was used in an attack in April 2018 in the town of Douma, near Damascus.

[...] In addition to chemical weapons, the regime also frequently employed prohibited cluster munitions and barrel bombs. The SNHR documented at least 3,420 barrel bombs dropped by Russian and regime helicopters and planes on Idlib between April and September, often striking civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, medical facilities, and schools.⁶¹

5.1.2 The USSD further stated that:

‘The SNHR attributed 28 civilian deaths to the HTS [Haya Tharir al-Sham] in the first half of the year. [...] Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS in March, the SNHR estimated the group was culpable for the deaths of at least 80 civilians during the year, including 11 women and seven children. [...] The SNHR attributed more than 116 civilian deaths to Kurdish forces (mainly the YPG) in the first half of the year. Following the October 9 launch of a cross-border Turkish military offensive into northeast Syria, the SNHR documented civilian casualties caused by SDF artillery fire into Turkey, such as two civilians, including an infant, killed by an October 10 strike in Akcakale.’⁶²

5.1.3 On 2 March 2020, the UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria published a report which covered the events between 11 July 2019 and 10 January 2020. The report stated:

‘In terms of ongoing hostilities, fighting between pro-government forces and armed opposition groups, including Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, in Idlib, northern Hama, Ladhqiyyah and western Aleppo Governorates intensified. The escalation of violence in the north-west continued in July and August when offensives by pro-government forces targeted armed opposition groups near the Al-Ghaab plain, Khan Shaykhun, Ma’arrat al-Nu‘man, Saraqib, Ariha and Jisr al-Shughur. Following the collapse of a conditional ceasefire on 5 August [2019], Syrian army units began a major ground offensive. By 21 August, pro-government forces had cut off the M5 motorway, encircled the Turkish observation post in Murak and recaptured several towns in northern Hama and southern Idlib.

⁶¹ USSD, ‘Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Syria’, (Exec Sum), 11 March 2020, [url](#)

⁶² USSD, ‘Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Syria’, (Section G), 11 March 2020, [url](#)

[...] Attacks on territories held by opposition forces and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham continued in November and December. Airstrikes and shelling peaked in mid-December when pro-government forces began a major offensive against Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Saraqib and surrounding rural areas. The campaign enabled the Syrian army to recapture several locations in southern Idlib around the M5 motorway. Retaliatory attacks by armed opposition groups followed in southern Aleppo and Ladhqiyyah. The ground and air campaigns resulted in civilian casualties and massive displacement. Between May 2019 and early January 2020, these attacks induced the displacement of 700,000 civilians towards the northern parts of the governorate. Areas surrounding Ma'arat al-Nu'man and Saraqib were completely depopulated.

[...] The situation in centre and south of the Syrian Arab Republic remained volatile. Throughout the reporting period, ISIL attacks in Dar'a, Homs and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates killed several Syrian soldiers. The terrorist organization regrouped in the east of the Syrian Arab Republic and increased attacks against pro-government forces, in particular around Mayadin and Albu Kamal. Sporadic clashes between the Syrian army and ISIL terrorists were also ongoing around Sukhnah and Tadmur (Homs Governorate) and had a significant impact on the security and freedom of movement of civilians.⁶³

- 5.1.4 The March 2020 UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria report further stated:

'During the period under review, attacks by belligerent parties killed and injured scores of Syrian women, men and children. Fierce battles further destabilized the provision of services, and deprived countless civilians from accessing medical services and education, as well as food and water. [...] Displacement was most often caused by the failure of warring parties to take all feasible precautions to spare the civilian population, or by other unlawful conduct by parties that carried out attacks with little regard for civilian life.'⁶⁴

- 5.1.5 Section 3 of the March 2020 UN COI report looks at the resurgence of violence against civilians. It documents in detail incidents of violence in Idlib, northern Hama, and western Aleppo, as well as Afrin and adjacent areas and north-east Syria carried out by various groups including pro-government forces, HTS, SDF and Daesh⁶⁵.

- 5.1.6 The same source stated the following in regard to the impact of the ongoing conflict and violence on the civilian population:

'As violence has engulfed life in the Syrian Arab Republic, civilians have fled their homes in desperation searching for safe heavens. Often, individuals suffer on the basis of multiple aspects of their identity, including their gender, age or ethnicity. Displacement fragments communities and causes family separation, thus magnifying the impact of civilians' suffering and shaping negative experiences differently.

⁶³ UN COI, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria', 2 March 2020, (p3-5), [url](#)

⁶⁴ UN COI, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria', 2 March 2020, (p5), [url](#)

⁶⁵ UN COI, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria', 2 March 2020, (p5-13), [url](#)

'Violence directed at the civilian population may particularly affect civilian women, including those of particular ethnicities. It can also have devastating consequences for older people, especially when access to basic services remains severely curtailed. Women and children with physical and intellectual disabilities are adversely affected by the conflict, in particular when compelled to relocate to displacement camps where health care is largely absent.'⁶⁶

- 5.1.7 In December 2019 the UN Security Council published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between October 2019 and November 2019. The report stated:

'Hostilities continued to have acute consequences for civilians across the Syrian Arab Republic. From 1 October to 22 November, OHCHR [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights] documented 136 civilian deaths within the de-escalation zone in Idlib and Aleppo: 59 men, 29 women and 48 children (28 boys and 20 girls). The deaths were attributed to alleged air strikes by government and pro-government forces and ground-based strikes exchanged between government and pro-government forces and non-State actors, as well as the terrorist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the Security Council. From 9 October, when Operation Peace Spring began, to 22 November, OHCHR documented incidents in which at least 147 civilians were killed, including 100 men, 20 women and 27 children. These reported deaths were attributed to military operations and other attacks involving improvised explosive devices.

'OHCHR has recorded a significant increase in the apparent indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices, including the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, in populated areas under the control of various non-State armed groups in the Syrian Arab Republic. A total of 123 incidents was reported during October and November, leading to an estimated 148 people killed and 352 wounded. On the basis of the consistent pattern of civilian harm, OHCHR assesses that there is a high likelihood that parties to the conflict have failed to respect the key international humanitarian law obligations of distinguishing civilians from fighters and civilian objects from military objectives; refraining from indiscriminate attacks; proportionality in attack; and precaution in the conduct of military operations. Civilians were also killed and injured by abandoned mines and explosive remnants of war, including unexploded ordnance.

'OHCHR has continued to receive reports of arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances. Reported cases include those of returnees in areas controlled by the Government through various government security forces. Relatives of those persons were not informed or were denied information about the circumstances, outcome and location of their family members.

'[...] Non-State armed groups have continued to systematically use intimidation and harassment as tactics against civilians, the media and health service providers perceived as affiliates to an opposing party or solely

⁶⁶ UN COI, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria', 2 March 2020, (p5), [url](#)

for being critical of the armed group in control of the territory. In the northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic, OHCHR recorded incidents in which civilians and fighters placed hors de combat appeared to have been summarily executed. The Government informed the United Nations that 83 civilians had been killed and 226 injured in attacks in areas not under their control between 22 October and 21 November.¹⁶⁷

- 5.1.8 The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) ‘is a disaggregated data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping project. ACLED collects the dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and modalities of all reported political violence and protest events across Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.’¹⁶⁸ In June 2020 the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) compiled data from ACLED and produced the below table, which shows the number of conflict incidents and fatalities across Syria’s provinces in 2019⁶⁹:

Province	Number of incidents	Number of incidents with fatalities	Number of fatalities
Al Hasakah	1247	299	1044
Aleppo	2673	537	1657
Ar Raqqah	602	205	778
As Suwayda’	79	34	72
Damascus	50	29	60
Dar’a	435	199	310
Dayr Az Zawr	1291	600	2656
Hamah	5245	542	2980
Hims	81	53	334
Idlib	6706	1062	4121
Lattakia	578	106	842
Quneitra	35	10	19
Rif Dimashq	333	169	399
Tartus	2	0	0

- 5.1.9 In February 2020 the UN Security Council published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between December 2019 and January 2020. The report stated:

⁶⁷ UN Security Council, ‘Implementation of Security Council resolutions [...]’ (p5-6), 16 Dec 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁸ ACLED, ‘About ACLED’, nd, [url](#)

⁶⁹ ACCORD, ‘Syria, year 2019: update on incidents according to ACLED’, (p4), 23 June 2020, [url](#)

'At least 427 civilians were killed in incidents verified by OHCHR from 1 December 2019 to 31 January 2020. That included 143 children – 87 boys and 56 girls – and 65 women. Their deaths were attributed to airstrikes, ground-based strikes, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war. Over 90 per cent of civilian deaths were recorded in areas outside the control of the Government and pro-government forces.

'[...] Over the reporting period, OHCHR recorded an intensification of airstrikes and ground-based strikes by government and pro-government forces that hit areas within the de-escalation area in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. Moreover, at least 344 civilian deaths – more than 80 per cent of the civilian deaths during the reporting period – were recorded in the north-west of the country as a result of airstrikes and ground-based strikes in Idlib, parts of Aleppo and Hama. They included 108 children – 55 boys and 53 girls – and 64 women.

'In areas under the control of various non-State armed groups in northern Syrian Arab Republic, such groups have continued systematically to target civilians, journalists and health service providers, including through killings, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment and enforced disappearances. In Idlib, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which the Security Council has designated a terrorist group, systematically imposed rules and codes of conduct in areas under its control that are fundamentally in violation of human rights law, including of the right to life, liberty and security of person, freedom of movement, expression, peaceful assembly and association. Through self-appointed courts, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham members have inflicted harsh penalties and executed persons whom it perceived to be critical of those rules or accused of opposing the group's ideology. OHCHR received reports indicating that the relatives of arrested individuals were denied information related to the fate and whereabouts of their family members.

'In some areas where control shifted to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, including Dar'a, violence – including the killing of civilians – continued in the context of the volatile security environment.⁷⁰

5.1.10 The same report also stated that a number of schools, hospitals and markets were heavily affected by both air and ground-based strikes resulting in a number of deaths and injuries⁷¹.

5.1.11 In April 2020 the UN Security Council published a report on the political, humanitarian and security related developments in Syria between February 2020 and March 2020. The report stated:

'The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified incidents, occurring from 1 February to 31 March 2020, in which at least 312 civilians, including 51 women and 100 children, had been killed and at least 466 civilians, including 55 women and 130 children, injured as a result of the conduct of hostilities across the Syrian Arab Republic, including due to airstrikes, ground-based strikes, improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, armed clashes and targeted

⁷⁰ UN Security Council, 'Implementation of Security Council resolutions [...]' (p5), 21 Feb 2020, [url](#)

⁷¹ UN Security Council, 'Implementation of Security Council resolutions [...]' (p5-6), 21 Feb 2020, [url](#)

killings, at the hands of various parties to the conflict. The majority of civilians were killed and injured due to an intensification of airstrikes and ground-based strikes by pro-government forces that hit areas within the “de-escalation area” in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic in February and early March. At least 208 civilians, including 39 women and 70 children, were killed as a result of reported airstrikes and ground-based strikes by government and pro-government forces in the north-west of the country.

‘On the basis of the consistent pattern of civilian harm, OHCHR has expressed strong concerns that parties to the conflict have failed to respect the key international humanitarian law principles of distinguishing civilians from fighters and civilian objects from military objectives; of refraining from indiscriminate attacks; of proportionality in attack; and of precautions in the conduct of military operations.

‘In areas under the effective control of various non-State armed groups in the northern part of the Syrian Arab Republic, such groups have continued to systematically target civilians, journalists and health service providers perceived as affiliated to an opposing party or allegedly critical of the armed group in control of the territory. The whereabouts and fate of many deprived of their liberty remain unknown. In Idlib, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the Security Council, has systematically imposed rules and codes of conduct on civilians living in areas under its control that are fundamentally contrary to human rights, including the right to life, liberty and security of person, to freedom of movement, to freedom of expression and to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Through self-appointed courts, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham members have inflicted harsh penalties and executed persons perceived as critical of the rules or accused of affiliation with the Government.

‘[...] In areas under the control of the Government, OHCHR continued to receive reports of civilians being detained without reasons provided to them and their families, raising concerns as to arbitrariness of arrest and detention. Relatives of the individuals detained by Government forces or non-State armed groups were not informed of, or were denied information related to, the fate and whereabouts of their family members, raising concerns that in some cases this could amount to enforced disappearances. OHCHR also continued to document in Dar’a Governorate cases of families that had received notifications of the death of relatives while in the custody of the Government. The bodies of the deceased were not returned to their families, and no information was provided regarding the circumstances of their deaths or the whereabouts of their bodies.’⁷²

- 5.1.12 Both of the UN Security Council reports cited above provide detailed information on reported incidents affecting civilians recorded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in their Annex sections.

[Back to Contents](#)

⁷² UN Security Council, ‘Implementation of Security Council resolutions [...]’, (p4-5), 23 April 2020, [url](#)

5.2 Idlib

5.2.1 On 14 May 2020, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) published a report looking at the security situation in Syria. The report, citing various sources, stated the following in regard to the recent security trends and impact on civilian population in Idlib:

'In the beginning of 2019, HTS [Hayat Tharir al-Sham] took control of territories in Idlib governorate and western Aleppo and northern Hama governorate, following clashes with other anti-GoS armed groups in the region, including the NLF [National Liberation Front] and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.

'[...] The CoI [UN Commission of Inquiry] noted that during the first half of 2019 Idlib was "embroiled in military escalation and a surge of violence against civilians". GoS forces and affiliated armed groups carried out military operations aimed at ousting HTS and affiliated armed groups from the area. Starting in February 2019, ground offensives and airstrikes on anti-GoS controlled areas including Idlib "escalated dramatically", destroying civilian infrastructure "including hospitals, markets, educational facilities and agricultural resources", and leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands. In April 2019, GoS supported by Russian air force launched a military offensive against the rebel held-Idlib enclave.

'Since June 2019, the Syrian government forces increased the military offensive against the armed opposition groups in Idlib area. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet stated in July referring to airstrikes in Idlib and other areas in north-western Syria that "this latest relentless campaign of airstrikes by the government and its allies has continued to hit medical facilities, schools and other civilian infrastructure such as markets and bakeries". The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights further stated that "these are civilian objects, and it seems highly unlikely, given the persistent pattern of such attacks, that they are all being hit by accident," [...]. "Intentional attacks against civilians are war crimes, and those who have ordered them or carried them out are criminally responsible for their actions". OHCHR [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights] reported that civilian casualties following airstrikes were recorded in at least 10 locations (eight in Idlib and two in Aleppo) between 16 and 25 July [2019], and totalled at least 103 civilians, including at least 26 children. The UN Security Council stated that more than 500 civilians were reportedly killed between April and July [2019] in the Idlib de-escalation area.'

'[...] According to USAID [United States Agency for International Development], GoS-airstrikes on Idlib governorate increased since mid-October 2019, targeting civilians and humanitarian infrastructure. The attacks reportedly led to multiple deaths and injuries between October and November. International Crisis Groups noted on the impact of the GoS offensive on Idlib that "air and artillery strikes have destroyed hospitals, bakeries, schools and other vital infrastructure, on purpose, as a way to

demoralise and uproot Idlib's civilian population and undermine its civilian administration".⁷³

5.2.2 The same source went on to describe the situation in early 2020 and stated:

'As of February 2020, the GoS forces and their allies are in the tenth month of an offensive to retake Idlib governorate from various anti-GoS armed groups. By February 2020, GoS forces captured the strategic towns of Maaret al-Numan and Saraqeb located at the intersection of the key highways linking Damascus to Aleppo. As of late February 2020, the GoS offensive resulted in the capture of around 200 communities in eastern Idlib and western Aleppo governorates since December 2019.'

'[...] In late February 2020, hostilities increased and frontlines were shifting rapidly. After suspected GoS airstrikes, potentially backed by Russia, killed 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib on 27 February, Turkey has increased its military engagement in the area, and fighting escalated between anti-GoS armed groups and Turkey on one side and GoS forces supported by Russia on the other. The Col wrote in a February 2020 statement that "in the last two weeks, attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools, markets, and medical facilities causing civilian casualties, including many girls and boys, have been reported. The deliberate and systematic targeting of hospitals follows a pattern already documented by the Commission, and may amount to war crimes. Continuing such attacks has been, and remains, completely unacceptable".⁷⁴

5.2.3 In a briefing to the UN Security Council on 28 February 2020, Rosemary Dicarolo, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs stated:

'[T]hat the security situation has continued to gravely deteriorate in and around Idlib. In the last nine days, Syrian Government forces, with support from the Russian Federation air force, have continued to advance, taking a large swath of villages in southern Idlib. Air strikes also continue in both front-line areas and population centres far removed from the fighting. During the same period, non-State armed groups launched a counter-attack in eastern Idlib, retaking the city of Saraqib, which they lost to Syrian Government forces in recent weeks. This action cut the Syrian Government's control of the strategic M5 highway. Turkish forces reportedly played a supporting role in this operation.'⁷⁵

5.2.4 On 6 March 2020 a ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey came into effect in Idlib. In an article entitled 'Syria war: Idlib ceasefire between Russia and Turkey begins', the BBC stated:

'The deal was signed in Moscow on Thursday by Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. A monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said a relative calm descended on the region. It comes after weeks of intense fighting between Turkish-backed rebels and Syrian forces supported by Russia. Around 60

⁷³ EASO, 'Syria: Security Situation', (p59-60), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁴ EASO, 'Syria: Security Situation', (p61-62), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁵ UN Security Council, 'Deadly Attacks on Civilians in Syria's Idlib Region', 28 February 2020, [url](#)

Turkish soldiers have been killed during a Syrian government offensive on Idlib - the last area of the country held by anti-government forces.

'The fighting has led to a humanitarian crisis in the province, and sparked fears of a direct military conflict between Russia and Turkey, a Nato member. Before the truce came into effect, Turkey said two of its soldiers had been killed in clashes with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces. Turkey said it had killed 21 Syrian troops and destroyed artillery pieces.'⁷⁶

- 5.2.5 The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) stated the following regarding the ceasefire in a situation report published on 20 March 2020:

'Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin reached a ceasefire agreement for Greater Idlib Province on March 5. The two sides agreed to halt hostilities, establish a security corridor 6 km to the north and 6 km to the south of the M4 Highway, and conduct joint patrols through rebel-held areas of the M4 Highway beginning on March 15. The first patrol began in Tarnaba and reached the outskirts of Nayrab before having to turn around due to the roadblocks and protests. Opposition members held a sit-in on the M4 Highway in the towns of Ariha and Nayrab to block Russian vehicles from patrolling and lit tire fires in the middle of the road. Al Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) reportedly provided transportation to the patrol areas to facilitate the anti-patrol protests.'⁷⁷

- 5.2.6 Despite the ceasefire, reports of violent clashes continued during March, April and May. Some examples of these clashes are shown below. On 17 March 2020 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) stated:

'The Syrian Observatory has documented further casualties this evening due to clashes on the frontline of Al-Fatira and the frontlines of southern countryside of Idlib. Four members among regime and loyalists were killed and others were injured, while attempting to infiltrate on Al-Fatira frontline.

'A member of jihadist faction was killed and four other of [sic] rebels were injured during the same clashes, which lasted for hours and regime forces were unable to pull out the bodies of the dead.

'It is worth mentioning that the Syrian Observatory monitored the first violation of the ceasefire at the dawn of March 6, where six members of regime forces and loyalists were killed, while at least nine of the "Turkistan Islamic Party" were killed

'This day is the second violation of the ceasefire in its 12th day in terms of casualties.'⁷⁸

- 5.2.7 On 16 April 2020 SOHR stated:

'SOHR sources say that drones renewed shelling on the frontlines in Al-Ankawi in Sahl Al-Ghab, northwest of Hama, as well as other frontlines in southern countryside of Idlib, accompanied by artillery shelling targeting Afis, Kansafra, Kafr Aweed, Al-Fatira, Majazir, Al-Salhia and Fulifel in Idlib

⁷⁶ BBC, 'Syria War: Idlib ceasefire between Russia and Turkey begins', 6 March 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁷ ISW, 'Syria Situation Report: March 4-17, 2020', 20 March 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁸ SOHR, 'Five regime soldiers and rebels killed during clashes', 17 March 2020, [url](#)

countryside, and the villages of Kafr Ta'al and Al-Qasr, west of Aleppo. No casualties have been reported.

'Meanwhile, three women were injured while working on agricultural land near the town of Taftanaz, east of Idlib, after being targeted by regime forces with heavy machine guns.

'Multiple violations took place during the last few hours on the 42nd day of the new ceasefire on the frontlines of Aleppo, Idlib and Hama.

'Reliable SOHR sources reported hours ago that a drone attacked a military vehicle belonging to "Jaysh Al-Nasr" in Sahl Al-Ghab, leaving at least three fighters dead, while five others sustained various injuries.

'The same drone also targeted a military vehicle of the jihadi organization "Hurras al-Din" in the same area.'⁷⁹

5.2.8 On 19 May 2020 SOHR stated:

'SOHR activists say that three regime soldiers were killed and five others injured, after being targeted by a guided missile by members of Hayaat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) on Kafranbel frontlines in Idlib countryside.

'Meanwhile, regime forces have shelled the village of Kafr Aweed in Idlib countryside with heavy artillery. No casualties have been reported.

'The Syrian Observatory has documented the death of a regime soldier on Talhiya frontline, east of Idlib, in a landmine explosion. Moreover, a landmine also exploded in a harvester in the village of Abad in southern Aleppo countryside, causing material damage. No casualties have been reported.

'Apart from that, tense calm continues throughout the "Putin-Erdogan" area on the 75th consecutive day of the new ceasefire.'⁸⁰

5.2.9 On 3 June 2020 Al Jazeera reported on Russian air raids in north west Syria for the first time since the ceasefire in March. The article stated:

'Russian air raids have targeted Syria's last major rebel-held enclave in the country's northwest for the first time since a March ceasefire came into effect, Syria's Civil Defence and a war monitor said.

'The attacks, which came in waves on Tuesday evening and at dawn on Wednesday, hit an area where the boundaries of Hama, Idlib and Latakia provinces meet, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said.

'No injuries were reported but opposition activists in the area said the air raids forced hundreds of people to flee their homes to safer areas further north.

'The attacks on and near Idlib province were the first to be conducted by Russian planes since a truce brought relative calm to the volatile region in early March.

'The ceasefire, brokered by opposition backer Turkey and Syrian government ally Russia, halted a bloody three-month air and ground campaign that killed at least 500 civilians.

⁷⁹ SOHR, 'Drones renew shelling on "Putin-Erdogan" area', 16 April 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁰ SOHR, 'HTS attacks regime positions, leaving eight soldiers dead or injured', 18 May 2020, [url](#)

'It also created the worst displacement crisis of the war in Syria, now in its 10th year. Nearly one million people were forced to flee, with many seeking shelter in the already overcrowded camps near the sealed border with Turkey.

'Some 840,000 of the nearly one million remain displaced, while approximately 120,000 have returned to their home communities since the ceasefire went into force, according to the United Nations.

'Home to some three million people, the Idlib region of the northwest is controlled by Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate, and other rebel groups.

'The SOHR said the latest attacks were intended to push opposition fighters away from the key M4 highway in northern Syria, where Turkish and Russian forces often conduct joint patrols as part of the truce agreement. They were also intended to push HTS and its allies further away from the Sahl al-Ghab area, where government and Russian forces are present, it added.

'[...] HTS and its allies control about half of Idlib province and slivers of territory in the neighbouring provinces of Hama, Latakia and Aleppo.'⁸¹

- 5.2.10 On 8 June 2020 Al Jazeera reported that at least two civilians were killed in air raids launched by Russian military jets on several villages in Idlib. The report stated:

'The air raids hit a string of villages in Jabal al-Zawiya, southern Idlib, and in towns in Sahl al-Ghab, an area bordering neighbouring Hama province.

'Waleed Asslan, a member of the Syrian Civil Defence - also known as the White Helmets, a volunteer search-and-rescue group that operates in rebel-held parts of Syria - said two people were killed after their homes were stuck in the attacks.

"Two people died so far and three others were injured in the town of al-Maouzrah," Asslan told Al Jazeera from the town of Ariha. He said men, women and children were fleeing from their homes in Jabal al-Zawiya towards the north fearing more air raids.

'Obaidah Dandoush, a pro-opposition activist in the area, confirmed the two deaths and said at least 12 towns were targeted as civilians fled. "There are two civilian deaths and several injuries so far," Dandoush told Al Jazeera, identifying the two civilians as Mostafa al-Hamsho, 30, and Hussein al-Aboud, 38.'⁸²

- 5.2.11 On 11 June 2020 the ISW provided the following 'key takeaway' from their Syria situation report looking at events between 27 May 2020 and 9 June 2020:

'Pro-regime forces are preparing to restart their offensive in Greater Idlib Province. Russia resumed airstrikes in southern Idlib on June 2 for the first time since the March 5 ceasefire; the airstrikes are a key indicator that pro-regime forces are preparing to renew their offensive in Idlib. Turkey is responding to the recent pro-regime build-up in southern Idlib by expanding

⁸¹ Al Jazeera, 'Russian air raids target NW Syria for first time in three months', 3 June 2020, [url](#)

⁸² Al Jazeera, 'Two killed as Russian jets hit towns in Syria's Idlib after truce', 8 June 2020, [url](#)

its own presence and increasing its air defense capabilities in southern Idlib in a likely attempt to deter the pro-regime campaign. Turkey previously deployed forces and air defense systems into Greater Idlib Province between February and March 2020.⁸³

5.2.12 On 30 June 2020 SOHR reported:

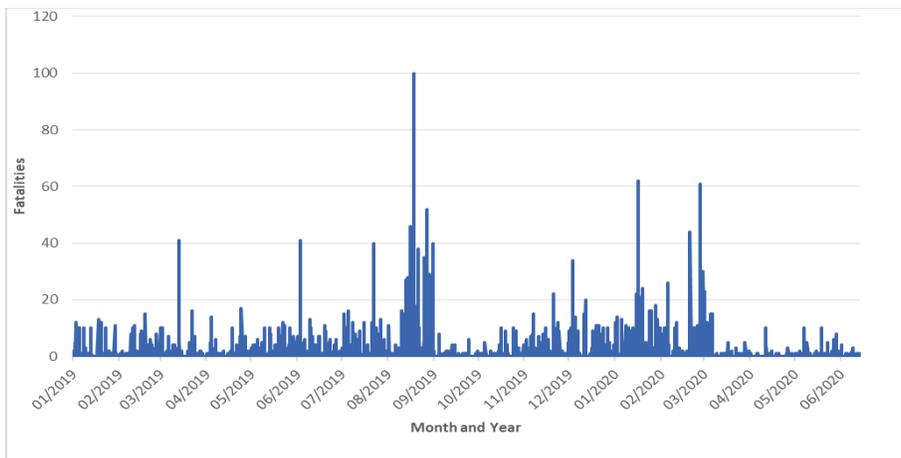
‘Regime forces have shelled, with heavy artillery, Kansafrah town in Jabal Al-Zawiyah, and the villages of Al-Ruwayha and Bayanin in the southern countryside of Idlib.

‘Regime forces also shelled Shannan village in rural Idlib countryside. The village hosts a Turkish military post, but no casualties have been reported yet.

‘SOHR sources reported earlier this morning that fierce clashes erupted in the southern countryside of Idlib in the early hours of Tuesday morning, between opposition factions and jihadi groups on one hand, and regime forces and loyalists on the other.

‘The clashes, accompanied by exchange of fire and shelling, followed a new attack on Fulayfel area in Jabal Shashaboo. No casualties have been reported.⁸⁴

5.2.13 Below is a graph compiled by CPIT using data taken from ACLED⁸⁵ showing the numbers of fatalities (these figures include all fatalities including civilians, government forces, armed militias etc) in the Idlib governorate between 1 January 2019 and 13 June 2020 (most recent data available at the time of writing).



[Back to Contents](#)

5.3 Hama

5.3.1 The EASO Syria security situation report published in May 2020 and citing various sources stated in regard to recent security trends:

‘On 30 January 2019, the Turkish news agency, Anadolu Agency (AA), reported that the Tiger Forces (Russia-backed) and the 4th Division (Iran-

⁸³ ISW, ‘Syria Situation Report: May 27-June 9’, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁴ SOHR, ‘Regime forces renew shelling positions in southern Idlib’, 30 June 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁵ ACLED, ‘Data Export Tool’, nd, [url](#)

backed) clashed in Al-Rasif village in Hama province. The clashes resulted in the death of at least 70 Syrian soldiers. In its report of 19 February 2019, OHCHR observed an increase in ‘infighting amongst non-State actors and in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in areas they control, including by the extremist group, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)’. BBC reported in February 2019 that the HTS “swept through towns and villages in Idlib province, as well as adjoining parts of Aleppo and Hama’ and forced some rebel factions out and others to surrender and recognise its “civil administration”. Some of such clashes in Hama governorate escalated to the use of heavy machine guns and RPGs, and caused casualties among civilians.

‘In April 2019, the GoS forces’ bombardment of areas controlled by HTS in northern Hama intensified. According to ACLED’s Regional Review of June 2019, clashes in northern Hama between GoS forces and rebel groups continued amid “intensive airstrikes conducted by Russian and regime forces”. However, the attempts of GoS forces to advance in opposition-held areas in northern Hama were unsuccessful. Human Rights Watch stated that between 26 April and 3 June 2019, Syrian and Russian forces “carried out hundreds of attacks every day across areas in the Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo governorates”, and “used banned cluster munitions and incendiary weapons in the attacks along with large air-dropped explosive weapons with wide-area effects, including ‘barrel bombs’ in populated civilian areas”. By the end of June 2019 the SAA brought “massive military reinforcements of heavy machinery, forces, in addition to military and logistic equipment to the northwestern countryside of Hama province”.

‘In July 2019, clashes between the SAA and opposition groups were reported in the north of Hama governorate. On 29 July 2019, the SAA launched a large offensive on the rebel-held areas in northern Hama, and recaptured a few strategic villages. In August 2019, the GoS accused rebel groups in northwestern Syria of violating the Astana agreement and resumed military operations and air raids in the area, causing civilian deaths.[...] The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) stated that on 23 August 2019 the SAA “announced the conquest of Kafr Zeita, Latamneh, Latmeen, Lahaya and Morek” and that “Hama province is considered to be fully under the control of the regime”.⁸⁶

5.3.2 The same source further stated:

‘On 6 December 2019, OHCHR noted that “[n]on-State armed groups [...] have recently escalated attacks on Government controlled areas including in southern Idlib, northern Hama, and Aleppo city”. Moreover, in its regional review of 1-7 December 2019, ACLED reported on an increase in the number of clashes in Idlib and northwest Hama. According to the source, “sustained ground and aerial bombardments were carried out” whereby Russian airstrikes resulted in the death of 20 civilians and Islamist fighters. UNOCHA’s report of 26 December 2019 echoed this, and stated that “fighting between GoS forces and NSAGs [Non-State Armed Groups] continue in northwest Hama with shelling injuring tens of civilians including women and children, damaging residential areas, and resulting in civilians

⁸⁶ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p91-92), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

restricting their movement”. Furthermore, a UN Security Council report dated 16 December 2019 stated that there were “active hostilities” in north-west Syria, including northern Hama, and that “[s]helling by non-State armed groups [...] in government-controlled areas was also reported”.

[...] Amidst reports on rapid advances by the SAA in north-west Syria in February 2020, media sources reported on ongoing clashes, and capturing and recapturing of villages in northern Hama countryside. On 26 February 2020, Step News reported that GoS forces advanced rapidly in Hama and Idlib countryside on two axes, one of which was Deir Sunbol – Shashabo Mount in Hama governorate. The Iranian Al-Alam reported on 27 February 2020 that the SAA captured a plethora of villages in northern Hama countryside. In February 2020 the Turkish Army targeted SAA positions in several provinces including Hama, in retaliation to the death of Turkish troops. Moreover, on 1 March 2020, Al-Araby stated that opposition factions launched an offensive in Sahl Al-Ghab and recaptured new villages.⁸⁷

5.3.3 On 10 May 2020 SOHR reported on an escalation of violence in Hama between pro-government forces and jihadist groups. The report stated:

‘Fierce clashes continue on Al-Manarah frontline (Tanjarah) in Sahl Al-Ghab in north-western countryside of Hama, between jihadi groups operating under “Wa Harred al-Mu’minin” operations room, and regime forces and loyalists. The clashes followed counter attack by regime forces backed by intensive ground firepower, in an attempt to recapture the village they lost to “Hurras al-Din organization” and other jihadi groups, hours ago.

‘SOHR activists have documented a spike in death toll among both conflicting parties due to the intensive shelling and fierce clashes. The death toll of regime soldiers and loyal militiamen has risen to 32, while the number of fatalities among jihadi groups jumped to 13. The death toll is expected to rise, as many injured are in serious conditions.

‘Meanwhile, the Syrian Observatory has monitored an attack with several bombs by reconnaissance drone, targeting the village of Al-Halouba in Jabal al-Zawiya, south of Idlib.⁸⁸

5.3.4 On 8 June 2020 SOHR reported on further conflicts within Hama:

‘Reliable sources have informed the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that jihadist groups affiliated with the operation room of “Waharid Al-Mu’minin” managed to take full control of the villages of Al-Manara and Al-Fatatra in Sahl al-Ghab, following shelling and violent clashes with regime forces who were forced to withdraw after the violent attack of the jihadists.

‘Meanwhile, battles continue between the two sides in the vicinity of the region and accompanied by intensive exchange of fire and shelling, with the flight of Russian jet[s] over the area.

‘SOHR activists have documented the death of 19 people among regime soldiers and loyal militiamen, while the number of fatalities among jihadi groups reached 6, due to the intensive shelling and fierce clashes. The

⁸⁷ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p92-94), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

⁸⁸ SOHR, ‘40 regime soldiers killed or injured by jihadists’, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

death toll is expected to rise as several injured are in a serious condition. Reported [sic] suggested that many others were killed.’⁸⁹

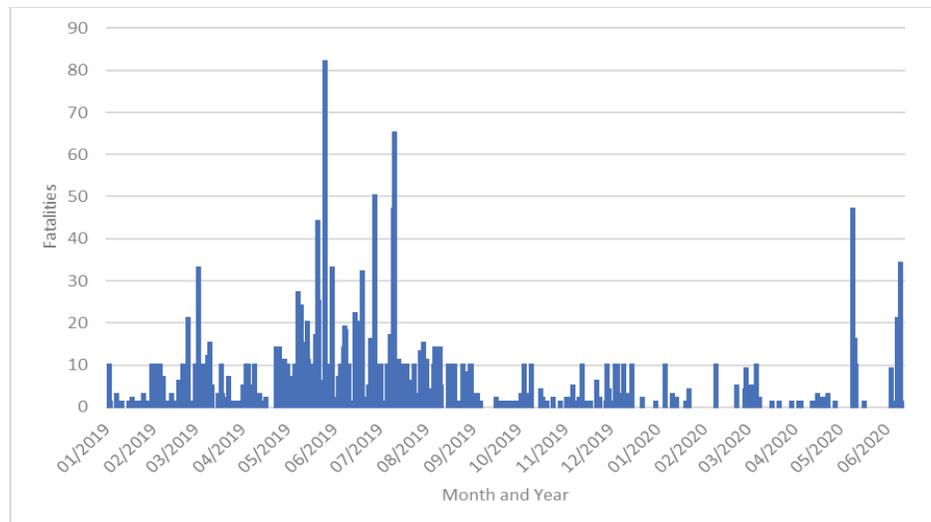
5.3.5 On 11 June 2020 SOHR reported on clashes between pro-government forces and Daesh:

‘Regime jets continued bombing ISIS positions in Oqayrabat district in the eastern desert of Hama, along with regime sweeping operations in Al-Rwaydah and Jana Al-Albawi areas, searching for ISIS cells.

‘These developments come after yesterday’s fierce attack by ISIS members and clashes which followed it, which [...] left great losses on both sides.

‘As SOHR activists documented more fatalities, the number of ISIS members who were killed in the air and ground strikes and clashes in the past 24 hours rose to 21, while 13 regime soldiers and loyalists were killed in the same clashes.’⁹⁰

5.3.6 Below is a graph compiled by CPIT using data taken from ACLED⁹¹ showing the numbers of fatalities (these figures include all fatalities including civilians, government forces, armed militias etc) in the Hama governorate between 1 January 2019 and 13 June 2020 (most recent data available at the time of writing).



[Back to Contents](#)

5.4 Aleppo

5.4.1 The EASO report published in May 2020 stated:

‘In 2019, there were 2370 security incidents recorded by ACLED in Aleppo governorate, of whom 1600 were coded as explosions/remote violence, 563 battles and 207 incidents of violence against civilians. Aleppo recorded the third highest number of security incidents in 2019 after Idlib and Hama governorates.

⁸⁹ SOHR, ‘25 regime soldiers and jihadists killed in violent attack’, 8 June 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁰ SOHR, ‘34 regime soldiers and ISIS members killed in less than 24 hours’, 11 June 2020, [url](#)

⁹¹ ACLED, ‘Data Export Tool’, undated, [url](#)

'Security incidents were recorded in all Aleppo governorate districts during 2019, with the highest number of overall incidents being recorded in Jebel Saman, A'zaz and Afrin. The largest number of battles took place in Jebel Saman, A'zaz, and Al Bab, while most incidents involving explosions/remote violence were documented in Jebel Saman, A'zaz and Afrin. Incidents of violence against civilians were particularly prevalent in Afrin. In the district of As-Safira, ACLED data recorded only one security incident in 2019.

'In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 861 security incidents of which 195 were battles, 640 explosions/remote violence and 26 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them occurred in the districts of Jebel Saman (617), A'zaz (120) and Afrin (74)⁹²

5.4.2 The same source stated:

'In January 2019, HTS took over territory held by other anti-GoS groups, particularly the NLF, its military expansion into western Aleppo and Idlib leading to at least 200 incidents during the first two weeks of the month, as recorded by the Carter Center.

In the first half of 2019 the Col reported an escalation of military hostilities in anti-GoS controlled areas, including western Aleppo governorate. Between February and July [2019], armed groups HTS and Jaysh al-Izza attacked GoS positions in Aleppo countryside using rockets, reportedly killing scores of civilians. The attacks were described by the Col as 'indiscriminate, indirect artillery fire into densely populated civilian areas, with no apparent legitimate military objective'. Reporting on February – March 2019, the UN Security Council stated that civilian casualties were recorded following ground-based strikes and airstrikes between GoS forces and HTS.

'In April and May, air and ground-based strikes by GoS and affiliated forces, and sporadic ground-based strikes by anti-GoS groups in Aleppo governorate led to 'large number of civilian deaths and injuries' as well as significant damage to infrastructure, public services such as medical and educational facilities, and housing.

'[...] Lower levels of HTS attacks on GoS controlled areas in Aleppo were recorded between August and September 2019. Clashes between Hurras al-Din and GoS forces were recorded in the Zmar area of Aleppo governorate.⁶²⁶ From 1 October to 22 November, OHCHR recorded 136 civilian deaths within the de-escalation zone in Idlib and Aleppo, attributing them to alleged airstrikes by GoS and affiliated forces as well as to ground strikes exchanged with anti-GoS armed groups.⁶²⁷ Military confrontations between GoS forces and HTS continued in December 2019.⁶²⁸ In late January 2020, ICRC stated that 'the violence in the city of Aleppo has reached an intensity not seen there since 2016, with shelling affecting several neighbourhoods. In rural western Aleppo and across Idlib governorate, meanwhile, fierce fighting is resulting in increased levels of suffering for families there. By mid-February 2020, the Syrian state agency SANA reported that GoS forces recaptured 30 villages and towns around Aleppo city in the western part of the governorate.'⁹³

⁹² EASO, 'Syria: Security Situation', (p82-83), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

⁹³ EASO, 'Syria: Security Situation', (p77-78), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

- 5.4.3 ISW stated in a Syria situation report for events between 1 April 2020 and 14 April 2020:

‘Lebanese Hezbollah militants reportedly clashed with the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Division, the Syrian Republican Guard, and the National Defense Forces (NDF) in Zaytan, western Aleppo Province, approximately 3 km east of the M5 Highway. Hezbollah forced the 4th Division, Republican Guard, and NDF elements to withdraw from their positions in the town. Hezbollah militants killed one NDF member and wounded several others. The number of Hezbollah casualties is unclear.’⁹⁴

- 5.4.4 On 28 April 2020 the BBC reported on a truck bomb attack in Afrin city in Aleppo governorate. The report stated:

‘At least 40 people have been killed in a bomb attack in the north-western Syrian city of Afrin, Turkey says. The governor of the neighbouring Turkish border province of Hatay said a fuel tanker rigged with a hand grenade exploded at a crowded market place. He and Turkey’s defence ministry blamed a Kurdish militia group, the YPG, which they see as linked to Kurdish militant groups inside Turkey. Afrin is controlled by Turkish forces and allied Syrian opposition factions.

[...] The fuel tanker exploded at an open air market in the central Souk Ali area of Afrin on Monday afternoon, close to the local government’s offices, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group.

‘The market is usually full of shoppers in the hours before Muslims break their daily fasts for the holy month of Ramadan. Images from the scene showed thick black smoke rising above a residential area, and cars and food stalls on fire.

‘The Turkish defence ministry said all of those killed in the attack were civilians and that they included 11 children. Forty-seven other civilians were wounded, it added.’⁹⁵

- 5.4.5 SOHR also reported on the same explosion in an article published on 28 April 2020 entitled ‘New blast hits Afrin after deadly fuel truck explosion which killed 40 people, including 11 children and six members of Turkish-backed factions’⁹⁶.

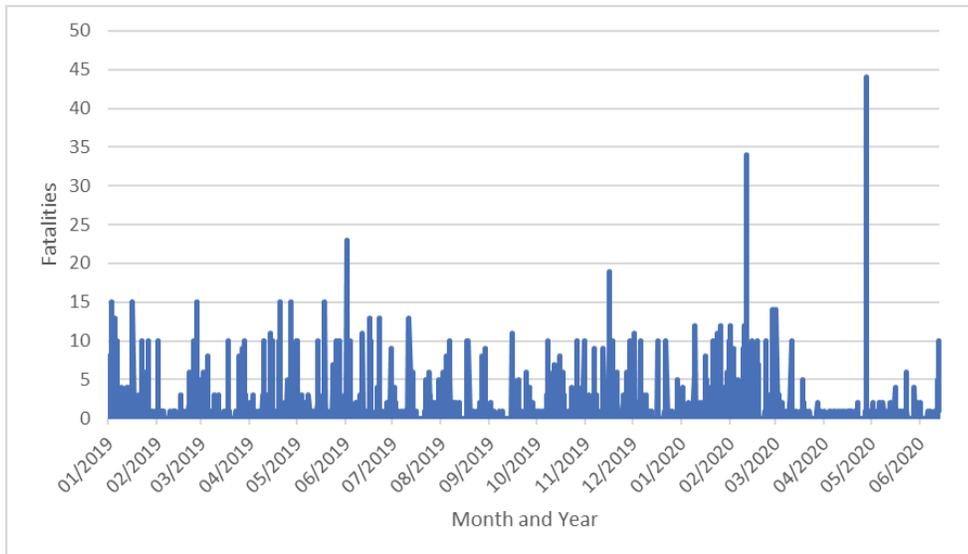
- 5.4.6 Below is a graph compiled by CPIT using data taken from ACLED⁹⁷ showing the numbers of fatalities (these figures include all fatalities including civilians, government forces, armed militias etc) in the Aleppo governorate between 1 January 2019 and 13 June 2020 (most recent data available at the time of writing).

⁹⁴ ISW, ‘Syria Situation Report: April 1-14 2020’, 16 April 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁵ BBC, ‘Syria war: Dozens killed in truck bomb attack at Afrin market’, 28 April 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁶ SOHR, ‘New blast hits Afrin after deadly fuel truck explosion’, 28 April 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁷ ACLED, ‘Data Export Tool’, nd, [url](#)



[Back to Contents](#)

5.5 Damascus

5.5.1 The May 2020 EASO report citing various sources stated:

‘Since May 2018, when the GoS forces regained control over Damascus and most of rural Damascus, there have been relatively few acts of violence in the city. According to DIS [Danish Immigration Service], the improvement in the security situation is “mainly because the government retook control of the last opposition-held areas in Damascus governorate, including Jobar and Yarmouk, and due to the government’s clearing of armed rebels from Rural Damascus, including Eastern Ghouta”.’⁹⁸

5.5.2 The same source further stated: ‘According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 38 security incidents recorded in Damascus governorate, of whom 3 were coded as battles, 17 explosions/remote violence and 18 incidents of violence against civilians. In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 12 security incidents of which one was coded as battles, 8 explosions/remote violence and 3 incidents of violence against civilians.’⁹⁹

5.5.3 On 26 February 2020 SOHR reported on a rise in violence in Damascus and stated:

‘Over February 2020, the capital Damascus saw unprecedented security chaos since the Syrian regime recovered the entire city. SOHR activists documented six explosions in Damascus during the period between the 7th and 25th of February. All explosions were caused by detonating IEDs in vehicles, which killed five persons while 15 others sustained various injuries.

‘On February 7, an IED went off under a car in Khaled bin Al-Walid Street in Damascus killing two regime soldiers. While on February 10, a regime intelligence official was killed after his vehicle had been targeted by an IED explosion near al-Jala hall in al-Mazzeah neighborhood.

⁹⁸ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p181), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁹ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p183-184), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

'The third explosion was caused by detonating an IED on February 18, in a vehicle of unidentified person in Bab Moussalla neighborhood, which killed him. A fourth IED explosion targeted a military vehicle in Al-Marjeh area in Damascus city center, on February 20.

'The last two explosions took place yesterday, the 25th of February 2020, in separate incidents. One explosion was in Al-Barakemah area, which killed one person and injured others. While the other explosion left several persons injured in the tunnel of al-Omawiyin Square.'¹⁰⁰

5.5.4 ISW stated the following in a situation report published on 20 March 2020:

'Damascus-based anti-Assad insurgent group Saraya Qasioun released a statement claiming responsibility for five attacks on pro-regime targets in Damascus and the surrounding countryside in the past month. The group claimed responsibility for a targeted car bomb attack on a member of the Palestinian Liberation Army in Qatana on February 26, a police station in Jaramana on March 1, and the assassination of a National Defense Forces (NDF) member with a sticky car bomb in the Dahadil neighborhood of Damascus City on March 13. The group also claimed two previous assassinations in the towns of Beit Jinn and Sa'sa in the southwestern Damascus countryside.'¹⁰¹

5.5.5 The same source stated the following in a situation report published on 2 April 2020:

'Unidentified anti-Assad insurgents targeted a Syrian regime forces commander with a car bomb in the village of al-Tekiyah in the western Damascus Countryside. Conflicting reports indicate the commander was affiliated with either the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Division or the National Defense Forces (NDF). The commander suffered serious injuries but survived. The commander reportedly led a military unit composed of mostly reconciled former rebels.'¹⁰²

5.5.6 ISW also reported that on 27 April 2020 'Likely Israeli Air Force aircraft targeted several unidentified Iranian proxy forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and regime positions in Kiswah and Sahnaya about 16 km south of Damascus City. The attacks reportedly killed at least four militants and destroyed several unspecified headquarters.'¹⁰³

5.5.7 Below is a graph compiled by CPIT using data taken from ACLED¹⁰⁴ showing the numbers of fatalities (these figures include all fatalities including civilians, government forces, armed militias etc) in the Damascus governorate between 1 January 2019 and 13 June 2020 (most recent data available at the time of writing).

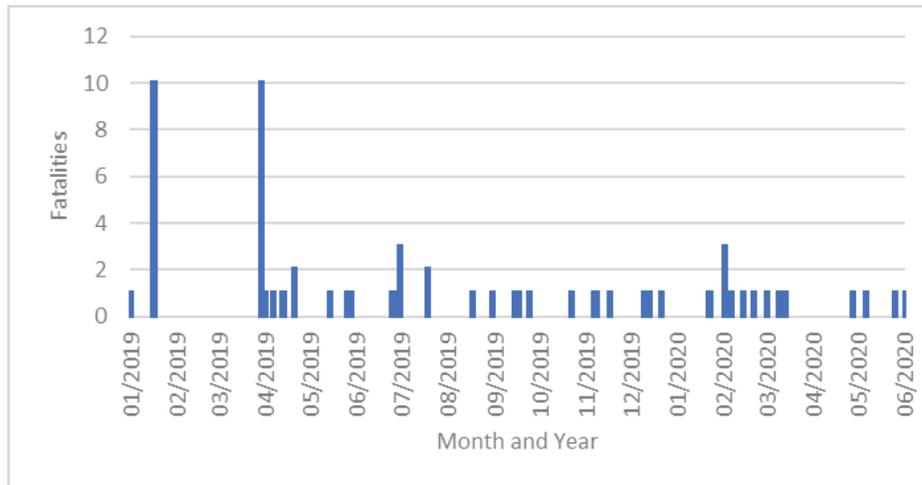
¹⁰⁰ SOHR, 'Damascus deteriorating security: six explosions rock Damascus', 26 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰¹ ISW, 'Syria Situation Report: March 4-17, 2020', 20 March 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰² ISW, 'Syria Situation Report: March 18-31, 2020', 2 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰³ ISW, 'Syria Situation Report: April 15-28, 2020', 30 April 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁴ ACLED, 'Data Export Tool', nd, [url](#)



[Back to Contents](#)

5.6 Homs

5.6.1 The May 2020 EASO report citing various sources stated:

‘Information about incidents in Homs city was scarce. However, the Carter Center reported between March and April 2019 on numerous incidents involving ISIL and the SAA/pro-government forces, mainly in the eastern parts of the governorate. Such incidents included ambushes and IED attacks.

‘[...] a report published by the DIS/DRC [Danish Immigration Service / Danish Refugee Council] in February 2019 stated that there were clashes between GoS forces and pro-government militias for economic interests and conflicting agendas. Reportedly, in some governorates including Homs, the clashes escalated, and machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) were used causing injuries among civilians. Moreover, the report stated that the northeastern parts of Homs, bordering Idlib, were “most exposed to shelling exchange between opposition groups and government forces”.

‘[...] The CoI reported in August 2019 that Israel “continued to attack alleged Iranian and Hezbollah targets in the Syrian Arab Republic”, and that in May and June 2019, the Israeli Air Force targeted progovernment positions in Homs and southern Quneitra. According to the report, Israeli air strikes on Homs, Rural Damascus and Damascus that were carried out on 1 July 2019 allegedly resulted in deaths and injuries among civilians.

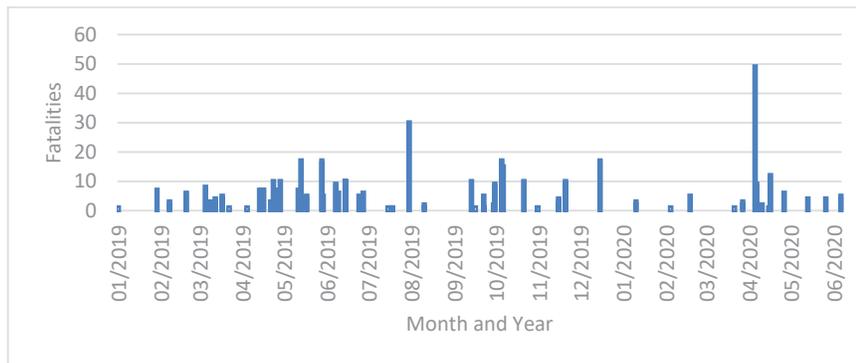
‘[...] Reporting on the period between July 2019 and January 2020, the CoI stated that “sporadic clashes between the Syrian army and ISIL terrorists were also ongoing around Sukhnah and Tadmur (Homs Governorate) and had a significant impact on the security and freedom of movement of civilians”. According to the Carter Center, “ISIS activity in central and southern Syria has become common in 2019”. In its report covering the period 28 October to 3 November 2019, the Carter Center stated that “ISIS activity remains elevated despite several GoS operations against ISIS in

recent months”. USCENTCOM also reported on ISIL attacks against GoS forces in Homs governorate that had “varying degrees of success”.¹⁰⁵

5.6.2 The same source further stated:

‘According to ACLED data, in 2019 there were 69 security incidents recorded in Homs governorate, of whom 33 were coded as battles, 27 explosions/remote violence and 9 incidents of violence against civilians. Most security incidents recorded by ACLED in 2019 were in the districts of Tadmor and Homs. In the first two months of 2020, ACLED recorded 10 security incidents of which 4 were coded as battles, 4 explosions/remote violence and 2 incidents of violence against civilians. Most of them were recorded in Homs district.’¹⁰⁶

5.6.3 Below is a graph compiled by CPIT using data taken from ACLED¹⁰⁷ showing the numbers of fatalities (these figures include all fatalities including civilians, government forces, armed militias etc) in the Homs governorate between 1 January 2019 and 13 June 2020 (most recent data available at the time of writing).



[Back to Contents](#)

Section 6 updated: 15 July 2020

6. Humanitarian situation

6.1 Overview

6.1.1 In March 2019, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published a report entitled ‘2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview’ which looked at the scale, severity and complexity of humanitarian needs of people in Syria. The report (the most recent of its kind at the time of writing) stated that there were 11.7 million people in need in Syria, of which 5 million are in acute need¹⁰⁸.

6.1.2 The report stated that:

‘People in Need (PIN) refers to people whose physical security, basic rights, dignity, living conditions or livelihoods are threatened or have been disrupted, and whose current level of access to basic services, goods and

¹⁰⁵ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p123-125), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

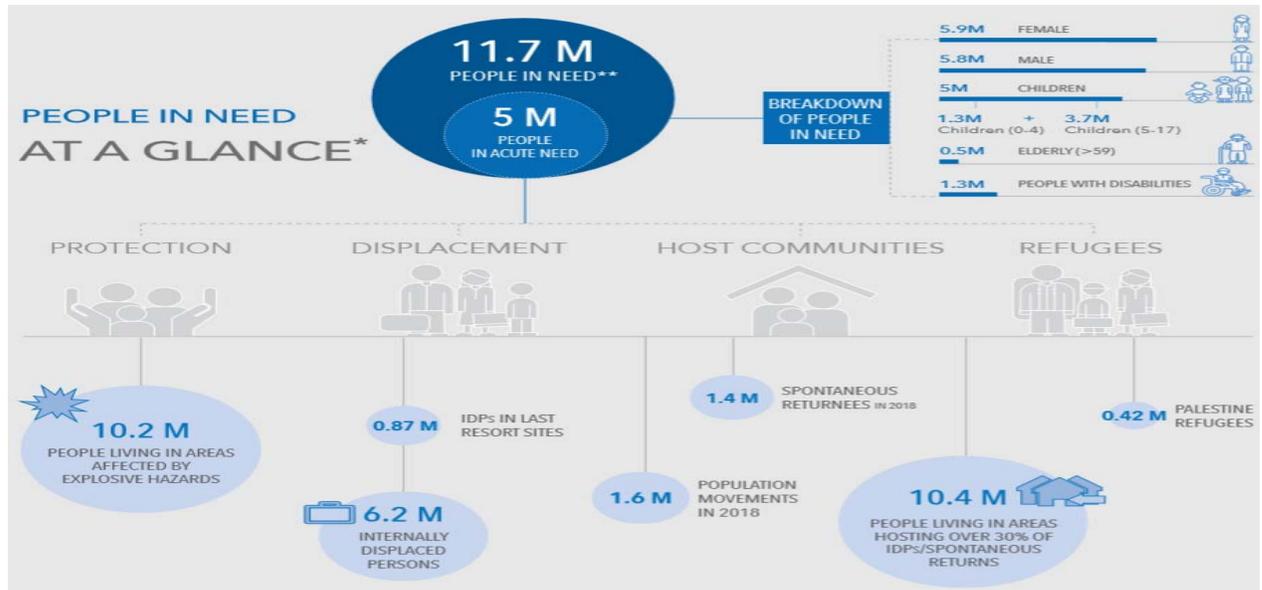
¹⁰⁶ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p125-126), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰⁷ ACLED, ‘Data Export Tool’, nd, [url](#)

¹⁰⁸ OCHA, ‘2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview’, (p8), March 2019, [url](#)

protection is inadequate to re-establish normal living conditions within their accustomed means without assistance. People in acute need refers to those facing more severe forms of deprivation in terms of their security, basic rights and living conditions and face life-threatening needs requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁹

6.1.3 The 2019 OCHA report included the following graphic showing the broad population groups that generally face humanitarian need in Syria. It should be noted that due to their exposure to multiple risk factors, many of these people belong to more than one group. As a result the overall number of people in need is lower than the cumulative total of these groups¹¹⁰:



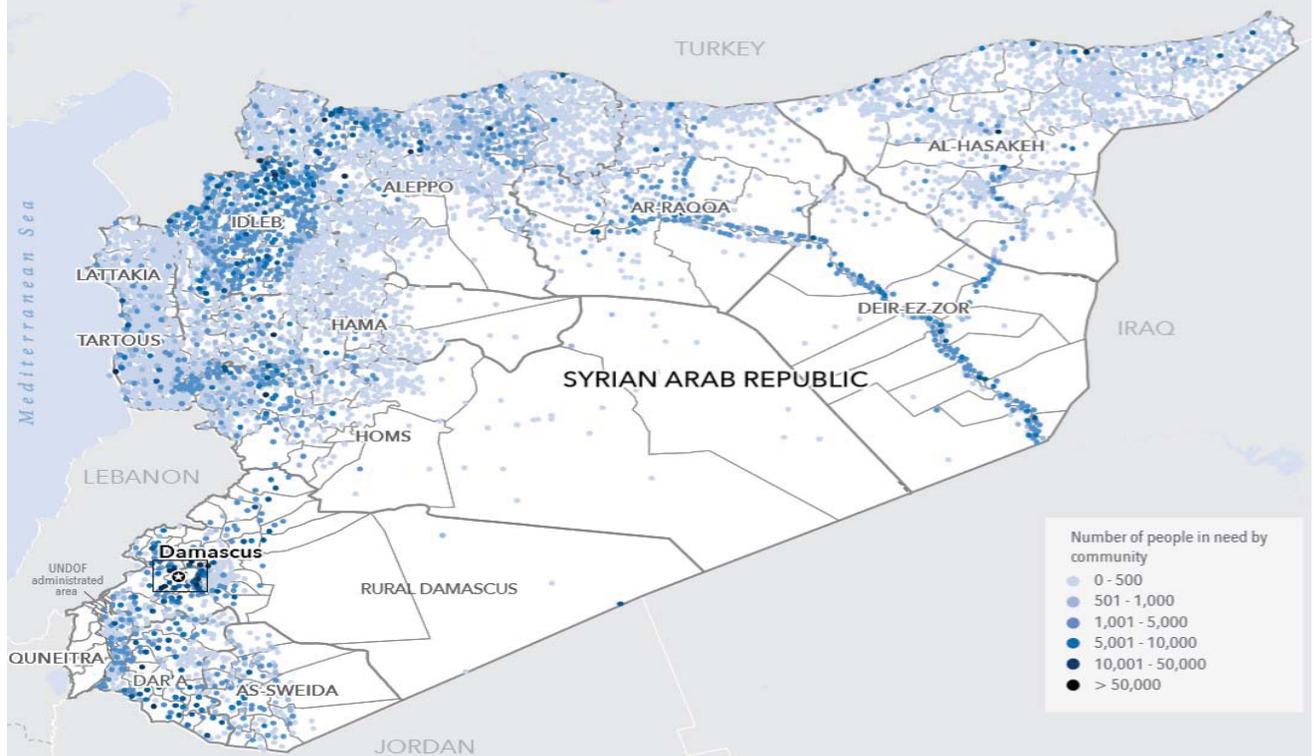
6.1.4 The OCHA 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview produced the following graphic showing the distribution of people in need in Syria¹¹¹:

¹⁰⁹ OCHA, '2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview', (p8), March 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ OCHA, '2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview', (p8), March 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹ OCHA, '2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview', (p9), March 2019, [url](#)

DISTRIBUTION OF PEOPLE IN NEED, 2019



6.1.5 The March 2020 UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria report stated:

‘At the time of writing, displaced women, men and children remain scattered, including hundreds of thousands living in overcrowded makeshift camps that dot the Syrian border, with limited access to food, water, health care and medicine. Elsewhere, displaced civilians remain reliant on already overstretched humanitarian assistance which, if interrupted, will put their lives at risk. Approximately 6.1 million civilians are displaced in the Syrian Arab Republic, while 5.6 million are registered as refugees outside the country.’¹¹²

6.1.6 The New York Times reported on a virtual meeting on 30 June 2020 of international donors pledging aid to Syria. The donors, which included some 80 governments and nongovernmental organizations, was focused solely on humanitarian aid. Collectively, the donors pledged US\$5.5 billion for this year, plus a further US\$2.2 billion for 2021. The report went on to say:

‘The aid is meant to be targeted toward Syrians in need throughout the country, whether in government-controlled areas or rebel ones, and to Syrian refugees in neighboring countries like Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as Egypt and Iraq. Donors have for years pushed the United Nations and aid groups to ensure the aid reaches those who need it, regardless of political control.

‘Life in Syria is getting worse even for those under government control, and the amount pledged here will still leave many destitute.

¹¹² UN COI, ‘Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria’, 2 March 2020, (p15), [url](#)

‘United Nations officials say that with raging inflation, a basket of basic food items providing 2,000 calories each for a family of five costs at least 200 percent more than it did a year ago. At the same time, salaries are stagnant.

‘The price of that basic monthly food basket is now 80,000 Syrian pounds, while the average monthly salary is 64,000 pounds, said Corinne Fleischer, the World Food Program’s director for Syria.’¹¹³

[Back to Contents](#)

6.2 Northwest Syria

6.2.1 REACH, a ‘humanitarian initiative providing granular data, timely information and in-depth analysis from contexts of crisis, disaster and displacement’¹¹⁴ produced a situation overview for Northwest Syria on 27 February 2020. The report stated:

‘Since the escalation of conflict in December 2019, the humanitarian situation in the opposition controlled enclave of Idlib has reached an intolerable level. The area, which was already highly vulnerable and dependent on aid, has seen the displacement of more than 950,000 people in just over two months. While some of the newly displaced are moving northwards to the relative safety of Azaz, Afrin, and other sub-districts in northern Aleppo, most are remaining within Idlib governorate, moving towards the border in and around already overcrowded camps and villages, as well as settling in open fields.

‘Even when displaced, civilian populations are not safe. As stated by the Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: “They arrive in a place thought to be safe, only for the bombs to follow”. With sub-zero temperatures, reports continue of children freezing to death and people huddling in caves and under plastic sheets to keep warm and safe. Local service providers and humanitarian actors working in the area have rapidly mobilised to respond to the escalating crisis. However, they lack the required resources to meet the exponential increase in need, and are facing significant logistic and security challenges that inhibit their operations.’¹¹⁵

6.2.2 On 16 March 2020 REACH published an update on the humanitarian situation in Northwest Syria. The report stated:

‘Overall, the humanitarian situation has continued to deteriorate in the opposition controlled enclave of Idlib, and “Olive Branch” and “Euphrates Shield” areas of northern Aleppo. The area which already hosted an estimated 1.12 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in November 2019, many of which are dependent on humanitarian assistance, has seen the further displacement of an estimated 959,000 people in just under three months. Most of those have been displaced to the relative safety of Azaz, Afrin and other sub-districts in northern Aleppo, as well as to Dana sub-district in Idlib.

¹¹³ New York Times, ‘At Syrian Aid Summit, ...Downward Spiral’, 30 June 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ REACH, ‘Who we are’, undated, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ REACH, ‘Northwest Syria: Situation Overview as of 27 February 2020’, Section 1, 27 Feb 2020, [url](#)

'Access to food has become an increasing concern due to diminishing availability in markets and rising prices, leading to more reliance on humanitarian assistance and other negative coping strategies. Increasing numbers of new IDP arrivals have added further strain to host community infrastructure. Local service providers and humanitarian actors lack the required resources, and are facing significant logistic and security challenges, to meet the growing needs of the population. Inadequate land for the formation of new camps and sites leaves many new IDPs in overcrowded conditions without formalised camp support. Of particular concern is northern Aleppo, where many IDPs continue to reside without shelters or in makeshift structures.'¹¹⁶

6.2.3 The same report summarised the needs and vulnerabilities of people in the area:

'Prior to the escalation of conflict in December 2019, the population of opposition-controlled areas of Idleb was already extremely vulnerable, hosting large numbers of IDPs, and dependent on humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs (ENT) [REACH Emergency Needs Tracking mechanism].

'On 9 March 2020, vulnerable groups – with specific humanitarian needs – were reported among new IDP arrivals in 89% of assessed communities in northern Aleppo and 99% of assessed communities in Idleb. Women-headed households were the most prevalent, as reported in 85% and 94% of communities in northern Aleppo and Idleb, respectively. The arrival of elderly-headed households (77%) and orphans (78%) was also commonly reported among communities in the assessed areas (ENT).

'Living conditions are dire as shelter needs remain severe among new IDP arrivals in Idleb and northern Aleppo. Shelter was selected as a top three priority need among KIs [Key Informants – 'Data collection is conducted remotely through REACH's network of key informants in Northwest Syria with one KI interviewed per community. KIs are chosen based on their knowledge of IDP populations and their needs'¹¹⁷] in 64% of communities in northern Aleppo and 79% of communities in Idleb. Within these communities, additional tents (89%) and plastic sheeting (61%) are the most common needs (ENT).

'Humanitarian assistance and borrowing were reported as top three food sources in 49% and 36% of communities in northern Aleppo and Idleb, showing that many IDPs rely on precarious means to source food. KIs also estimated that 18% of newly displaced IDPs are eating one meal a day or less (16% in Idleb and 23% in northern Aleppo) (ENT).

'Lack of access to shelter, coupled with anticipation of future conflict escalation, are likely to trigger further displacement. According to the latest ENT assessment, the two most common reasons for intending to leave to a new community were in order to access improved shelter and humanitarian assistance. Of IDPs intending to remain in their current locations, an inability

¹¹⁶ REACH, 'Northwest Syria: Situation Overview as of 16 March 2020', Section 1, 16 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁷ REACH, 'Northwest Syria: Situation Overview as of 16 March 2020', (Sec.6), 16 March 2020, [url](#)

to pay for transport was cited as the second most frequent reason to remain after family/relative ties to the community (ENT).

‘Humanitarian support remains limited both as a result of barriers in access and misalignment with key priority needs of vulnerable populations. In northern Aleppo, the primary stated barrier for further humanitarian assistance was due to restrictions from actors controlling the area (54% of communities), and infrastructure or physical barriers was reported as the key challenge in Idleb (72% of communities). Further, few KIs reported shelter or NFI assistance being provided in their communities, despite shelter and NFI ranking as a top three priority need in 64% of communities in northern Aleppo and 79% of communities in Idleb. Humanitarian assistance for shelter to newly displaced IDPs was reported in only 7% of communities in northern Aleppo and 14% of communities in Idleb (ENT).’¹¹⁸

6.2.4 In April 2020, OCHA published a situation report regarding the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria as of 17 April 2020. The report stated the following:

‘The humanitarian situation for people remains alarming across northwest Syria. While active hostilities came to a halt in early March, the impact of recent military operations as well as multiple displacements, economic hardship and years of conflict continue to affect the lives of civilians. Of the nearly 1 million people in the area who fled their homes to escape from hostilities between December and early March, some 854,000 people reportedly remain in displacement, a figure comprising many vulnerable groups such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, and female- or child-headed households. Though displacement has largely stopped, the humanitarian needs of the people who have been displaced and the preexisting needs of the wider community remain extremely high.

‘Humanitarian needs are increasing for some people in some parts of western Aleppo governorate and southern Idleb governorate as thousands of families reportedly return to areas from which they fled, compounded as many services in these locations were suspended or moved elsewhere as a result of recent hostilities. According to an assessment conducted by a UN partner on 16 April, 106,000 people displaced since 1 December 2019 have voluntarily returned to their areas of origin in Idleb and western Aleppo governorates. An additional 20,000 who had been previously displaced to these areas from other parts of northwest Syria due to hostilities prior to December 2019 also reportedly arrived back to their former place of displacement.

‘[...] The most urgent needs of the recently displaced individuals continue to be shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, food and protection. Concurrently, as the displaced population begins to settle in, needs with longer term impacts are increasing in prominence, such as health, nutrition and education services. Additional needs have also arisen in light of the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people living in northwest Syria, on

¹¹⁸ REACH, Northwest Syria: Situation Overview as of 16 March 2020’, (Sec.4), 16 March 2020, [url](#)

local health systems, and on the humanitarian partners delivering assistance.’¹¹⁹

6.2.5 For more information on the humanitarian situation in north west Syria in April 2020 see the [REACH Humanitarian Situation Overview](#) for April 2020.

6.2.6 In May 2020, OCHA published a situation report regarding the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria as of 15 May 2020. The report stated the following:

‘People living in northwest Syria continue to endure a severe humanitarian situation as their lives remain impacted by the effects of displacement, military operations, the protracted conflict and collapse of the Syrian Pound, as well as the threat of a COVID-19 outbreak. The ceasefire introduced in early March has provided significant respite from airstrikes and there have been fewer artillery bombardments, although increasing IED incidents and reports of clashes between non-state armed groups (NSAGs) indicate mounting insecurity in Idlib and the Afrin and A’zaz to Jarablus areas.

‘A significant increase in hostilities was observed on 10 May, after a non-state armed group carried out a military operation in the Al Ghab plain area in northern Hama governorate, and communities in the area experienced the most shelling reported since the start of the ceasefire. At least one woman was killed and two men were injured as a result of these hostilities, according to local sources. This occurred after two consecutive days without reported hostilities (7-8 May). Increasing tensions between NSAGs and between NSAGs and civilians have been reported, in some cases leading to violent confrontations, as have cases of arbitrary arrests, abduction and detainment, including by NSAG members. On 8 May, local sources reported a high number of suspected abductions in the Idlib area, with four separate incidents resulting in the abduction of four women, two men, and two children. Many of the victims are reportedly displaced persons. Such abductions are usually for ransom.

‘Some 840,000 of the nearly 1 million people displaced in northwest Syria between December 2019 and early March 2020 reportedly remain in displacement, including some 500,000 children and nearly 180,000 women. Longer-term needs are increasing, including for health, nutrition and education services, even as urgent needs for shelter, food, water, sanitation, hygiene and protection remain. At least 140,000 people have moved back to areas in Idlib and western Aleppo governorates from which they were displaced since December 2019, comprising some 20,000 people who moved back to areas to which they were previously displaced and some 120,000 people who returned to their areas of origin. According to a UN partner, Ariha and Atareb recorded the most arrivals with each receiving some 30,000 people, followed by Ehsem with some 14,000 people and Sarmin and Jisr-Ash-Shugur, each receiving some 10,000 people. Humanitarian needs in areas of arrival are increasing, while delivery of assistance is inhibited by a lack of basic services, displacement of

¹¹⁹ OCHA, ‘Recent developments in northwest Syria – as of 17 April 2020’, (p1-2), 17 April 2020, [url](#)

humanitarian partners away from these areas, contamination by explosive remnants of war (ERW), and proximity to the frontlines.¹²⁰

6.2.7 In June 2020, OCHA published a situation report regarding the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria as of 12 June 2020. The report stated the following:

‘The humanitarian situation in for people northwest Syria remains severe as the decline of the economic situation exacerbates the effects of the ongoing conflict on the four million people living in the area. The impact of the COVID-19 mitigation measures and the rapid devaluation of the Syrian Pound (SYP) are putting additional strain on the population, which has already eroded significantly through nine years of conflict, insecurity, displacements and economic hardship. An estimated 2.8 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, water, health and education; the impact of these recent developments are entrenching the existing humanitarian needs and creating new needs.

‘[...] There are multiple drivers of people’s humanitarian needs in northwest Syria, including displacement. Of the four million people living in northwest Syria, 2.7 million people are estimated to be internally displaced. Most recently, some 780,000 of the nearly 1 million people displaced in northwest Syria between last December and early March reportedly remain in displacement. Longer-term needs are increasing, including for health, nutrition and education services, even as urgent needs for shelter, food, water, sanitation, hygiene and protection persist. For instance, more than 300,000 people who were displaced during the latest wave of violence were not able to receive emergency food assistance due mainly to funding shortages. Just over half of the 100,000 tents needed to accommodate 500,000 people displaced between December and March were installed as of 2 June. Overall, some 1.4 million displaced people, meaning some 270,000 families, are estimated to be living in IDP sites across northwest Syria. 80 percent of this displaced population, some 1.12 million people, are women and children. For people in northwest Syria, displacement not only means the loss of their homes, but also the loss of their livelihoods due to the predominantly agricultural population’s loss of access to their fields and/or livestock. For the 180,000 people who have returned to their home communities and 20,000 displaced people who returned to their former places of displacement, difficulties persist as basic services and humanitarian activities had been suspended in areas close to the frontlines where they have returned.

‘The ceasefire announced on 5 March has reduced violence significantly. However, military developments on the ground including shelling and clashes along the frontlines in southern Idlib and airstrikes on 8-9 June are concerning. As a result of these tensions, civilians living in areas close to the frontlines in southern Idlib and northern Hama, including those who had recently returned to these areas after the ceasefire, are once again fleeing from their homes. While the number of people who are moving is not yet clear, local sources estimate that hundreds of families have already fled.

¹²⁰ OCHA, ‘Recent developments in northwest Syria – as of 15 May 2020’, (p1-2), May 2020, [url](#)

Given the precarious economic situation as well as COVID-19 concerns, a displacement movement may be even more devastating than usual for those who have to flee their homes and for the host communities receiving them, who are themselves facing difficulties coping with the economic downturn.¹²¹

6.3 Damascus

6.3.1 The EASO COI Report 'Syria – socio-economic situation – Damascus City', published February 2020, included information from a March 2019 report by the DIS who carried out a series of interviews with sources on the socio-economic situation :

'[...] sources stated that “there is no shortage of basic food items in Damascus City, and all items are found at different qualities and prices”. The same source remarked that there has been “a drastic increase in food prices due to a drop in the value of the Syrian pound. Low-income groups in the city can still afford to purchase basic food items but they have to prioritise and rationalise their food purchases due to the recent sporadic increase of prices of some basic food items. People’s income does not match the expenses. Many families have to rely on their extended family and networks, or financial support from friends or relatives abroad to afford to feed their families”.¹²²

6.3.2 With reference to housing in Damascus the same report noted that “in recent years the cost of houses has been prohibitive meaning that “most people cannot afford buying or renting a house or a flat inside the city” and forcing many to live in poor suburbs such as Mazzeh or Rukn al-Din where basic services are available but the infrastructure is “vulnerable”, meaning slight damage can impact a larger area.¹²³

6.3.3 For more information on the humanitarian situation in Syria, see the following websites and reports:

- [OCHA page](#) on Syria¹²⁴
- [OCHA Humanitarian Response page](#) for the whole of Syria¹²⁵
- [REACH Syria Country Overview](#)¹²⁶
- EASO COI Report, April 2020, [Syria; Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility](#)¹²⁷

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 7 updated: 15 July 2020

¹²¹ OCHA, 'Recent developments in northwest Syria – as of 12 June 2020', (p1-2), 12 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²² EASO, 'Syria, socio-economic situation – Damascus City' (page 25), February 2020, [url](#)

¹²³ EASO, 'Syria, socio-economic situation – Damascus City' (page 26), February 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁴ OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', nd, [url](#)

¹²⁵ OCHA Services, 'Humanitarian Response – Whole of Syria', nd, [url](#)

¹²⁶ REACH, 'Syria – Country Overview', nd, [url](#)

¹²⁷ EASO, 'Syria: IDPs, returnees and internal mobility', 3 April 2020, [url](#)

7. Freedom of movement

7.1.1 The United States Department of State (USSD) report for Human Rights Practices in Syria published in March 2020 and covering events in 2019 stated:

'The constitution provides for freedom of movement "within the territories of the state unless restricted by a judicial decision or by the implementation of laws," but the regime, ISIS, and other armed groups restricted internal movement and travel and instituted security checkpoints to monitor such travel throughout the regions under their respective control.

'[...] In regime-besieged cities throughout the country, regime forces blocked humanitarian access, leading to severe malnutrition, lack of access to medical care, and death. The violence, coupled with significant cultural pressure, severely restricted the movement of women in many areas. Additionally, the law allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.

'The regime expanded security checkpoints into civilian areas to monitor and limit movement. Regime forces reportedly used snipers to prevent protests, enforce curfews, target opposition forces, and, in some cases, prevent civilians from fleeing besieged towns. [...] The consistently high level and unpredictability of violence severely restricted movement throughout the country.

'In areas they still controlled, armed opposition groups and terrorist groups, such as the HTS, also restricted movement, including with checkpoints. The COI reported in September it had received accounts of harassment, including of women, arbitrary arrest, unlawful search and seizure of property, and demands for bribes at checkpoints administered by the HTS and other armed actors.

'While the Syrian Democratic Council and the SDF generally supported IDP communities in northeast Syria, in July HRW reported that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was restricting the movement of more than 11,000 foreign women and children suspected to be affiliated with ISIS in a separate section of the al-Hol IDP Camp. The UN secretary-general also released a report on children and armed conflict stating that 1,248 children of 46 nationalities were deprived of their liberty to move freely by the SDF due to their actual or alleged association with ISIS.¹²⁸

7.1.2 The March 2020 UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Syria report stated the following in regard to areas which are held by the Syrian government:

'A network of checkpoints remained across "reconciled areas", including in Dar'a and eastern Ghutah, in contravention of the assurances made during "reconciliation processes". This has severely restricted the freedom of movement of the civilian population, primarily affecting adult men who feared apprehension and forced conscription. Recently, the use of rapidly deployed ad hoc checkpoints in Duma, has instilled additional fear among the population.

'The ubiquitous checkpoints have further enabled members of the security services to extort residents. One interviewee told the Commission that "even if you are not wanted, you are at risk of being taken at checkpoints. If you

¹²⁸ USSD, 'Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Syria', (Section D), 11 March 2020, [url](#)

need to move, you always need to consider taking some money with you to bribe officials.” These restrictions impeded civilians’ access to basic services, including health care and education, and confined those lacking financial resources to their homes. In Duma City, authorizations are required in order to enter and exit. Without such authorizations, residents reported having to pay large bribes at checkpoints to gain access to hospitals to treat their medical conditions.¹²⁹

- 7.1.3 The EASO May 2020 report noted that, according to sources interviewed by the DIS in November 2018, ‘...controls within Damascus “do not amount to much”, but ID documents are thoroughly checked at the entrance of the city. The Air Force Intelligence service [one of the security agents running checkpoints] is the strictest in checking. Authorities search for conscription evaders and persons sought for other reasons.’¹³⁰

For more information see the April 2020 EASO COI Report, [Syria Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility](#)¹³¹.

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 8 updated: 15 July 2020

8. Returning to Syria

8.1 Security clearance

- 8.1.1 The March 2020 EASO report entitled ‘Syria; Targeting of Individuals’, citing various sources, stated:

‘Syrians wishing to return to their place of origin in GoS-retaken areas, are requested to gain security approval by going through a “security clearance” involving interrogation by Syrian security forces. This “clearance” implies providing extensive information on any involvement they had with the political opposition. Government guarantees “forgiveness” to returnees when they tell the truth. However, in many cases this does not work out as promised, as a recent survey amongst Syrians returning to government-held areas, cited in the Washington Post, revealed: “About 75 percent had been harassed at checkpoints, in government registry offices or in the street, conscripted into the military despite promises they would be exempted, or arrested”.

‘It is not self-evident that returnees are allowed to return. A source interviewed by DIS noted that those not allowed to return were people whose names were on the “wanted” lists and “the government wanted to send a message that those affiliated with armed opposition groups are not welcome in Syria”.¹³²

[Back to Contents](#)

8.2 Treatment upon return

- 8.2.1 The March 2020 EASO report stated:

¹²⁹ UN COI, ‘Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria’, 2 March 2020, (p14), [url](#)

¹³⁰ EASO, ‘Syria: Security Situation’, (p182), 14 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³¹ EASO, ‘Syria: IDPs, returnees and internal mobility’, 3 April 2020, [url](#)

¹³² EASO, ‘Syria: Targeting of Individuals’, (p26-27), 10 March 2020, [url](#)

'A source interviewed by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) stated that returnees at the border may be detained for a short period (between one hour and several days). The majority of these were released but he knew of 38 men who were still detained at the time of the interview. Other sources added that persons who had evaded military conscription or who (or family members) had connections with an armed opposition group, or who is part of an NGO inside or outside Syria, or is travelling back and forth to Syria from abroad, may face issues such as extortion, forced conscription, arrest and detention.

'The OHCHR stated in February 2019 that despite changes in the situation in Syria, those returning face a lack of rule of law, widespread human rights violations and poor economic prospects, noting that "safe and sustainable returns" were not possible due to continuing hostilities.'¹³³

8.2.2 The same source further stated:

'Some of the challenges that returnees may face, according to the European Institute of Peace (EIP), are:

- State guarantees as part of reconciliation agreements are not fulfilled, for both individuals and communities. There are many reports of returnees having been arrested, detained, harassed or conscripted after they had completed the reconciliation process and received protection papers;
- The control of Syrian security sector over society is strengthening. The Syrian military and security services arrest and detain individuals, "both to gather intelligence and punish those considered disloyal and to extract payments from families for the release of loved ones";
- Refugees and IDPs wanting to return have to reconcile with the state and fill in "extensive forms that defy international practice for refugee returns". These forms are difficult to understand and there is no adequate information on the procedures regarding returns and reconciliation;
- Returnees are forced to give "extensive amounts of information" about their contacts and activities abroad. "There are no guarantees in place that this information will not be used against the individual or others, [including their loved ones], in the future";
- The Syrian government does not allow international agencies to carry out data collection and to monitor returnees.'¹³⁴

8.2.3 A report published by the European Institute of Peace (EIP) entitled 'Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity' published in July 2019 stated:

'Significant numbers of arrests and detentions are occurring across the country, in all categories of returnees: refugees returning from abroad, IDPs returning from within the country, or through reconciliation. These risks are reflected in refugee intentions surveys, which routinely identify security concerns as the primary barrier to return. Particular risk profiles appear to be more susceptible to arrest, such as those who return without seeking

¹³³ EASO, 'Syria: Targeting of Individuals', (p27), 10 March 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁴ EASO, 'Syria: Targeting of Individuals', (p27), 10 March 2020, [url](#)

security permissions and reconciling before travelling, individuals who worked in sectors or activities believed to be associated with the opposition (journalism, aid work, local councils, rescue workers), men of military age, and those with family members who were forcibly displaced to Idlib or Aleppo. However, arrests are taking place across all demographics, and it cannot be assumed that only those within these groups are at risk of being detained or arrested, now or in the future.’¹³⁵

8.2.4 The same source further stated ‘Even among the self-selecting “voluntary” returnees, hundreds of detentions and arrests have been reported—including of refugees from abroad, IDPs from armed opposition areas, and those who have undergone a “reconciliation” in an area retaken by the government. Recent detainees report having experienced brutal torture while in custody; deaths in custody have also been recorded.’¹³⁶

8.2.5 The report published in April 2020 by EASO entitled ‘Syria; Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility’ and citing various sources stated:

‘The Syrian government’s regular restrictions on humanitarian agencies hamper these organisations from playing a part in the repatriation of Syrians, often leaving these agencies and organisations with little space to negotiate with the government.

‘[...] The EIP report on refugee return in Syria cites data collected from the UN system, as well as Syrian human rights organisations, like Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) and Urnammu, relating to arrests and detention of IDPs and returnees. SNHR documented 312 arrests carried out in Syria of persons who returned from abroad in 2017, and no less than 719 in 2018. The organisation further reported over 5600 arrests carried out in 2018 against returnees inside Syria to government controlled areas. Both organisations attributed the rise in the number of detentions, reportedly since October 2018, to the increase in the numbers of return to formerly held opposition areas. EIP further noted that returnees from Idlib to Hama and Idlib to Eastern Ghouta are particularly vulnerable to arrest, as well as those returning without prior clearance.

‘Despite having reconciled their status, and completed their papers with the authorities, returnees from rebel-controlled areas are reported to have faced detention upon return. The town of Zabadani reported some arrests of returnees. Although most have been released after questioning, some remain missing. Locals in Zabadani also report being stopped and harassed at checkpoints, and having their phones searched. Others have been questioned for communicating with relatives in Idlib.

‘The threat of detention, torture and death by Syrian security state upon return can reportedly be unpredictable. Refugees interviewed by the International Crisis Group between November 2018 and July 2019 stated “that refraining from anti-regime activities does not guarantee safe return”. In September 2019, Human Rights Watch reported on the arrest and detention of Syrian refugees returning from Lebanon. Witnesses Human Rights Watch

¹³⁵ EIP, ‘Refugee Return in Syria [...]’, (p5), July 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁶ EIP, ‘Refugee Return in Syria [...]’, (p4), July 2019, [url](#)

spoke to said that they were arrested and deported by the General Security Directorate in Lebanon, whereupon they were handed over to the Syrian border authorities upon deportation. Recent detainees informed that they were tortured in government custody within months of their return to Syria.

‘Syrian refugees in Lebanon have pointed out that another risk they fear upon returning is the practice of writing a taqir (a “report”, meaning reporting people to the security agencies). They reported on instances of detention upon return as a result of being denounced by neighbours or even family members. The practice of writing a taqir is reportedly used either to avoid being targeted, for personal gain or vengeance.’¹³⁷

- 8.2.6 For more information on return procedures including regulating status in post-reconciliation areas, wanted lists, military conscription and access to properties and housing see the EASO reports entitled ‘[Syria: Targeting of individuals](#)’¹³⁸ and ‘[Syria: Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility](#)’¹³⁹.

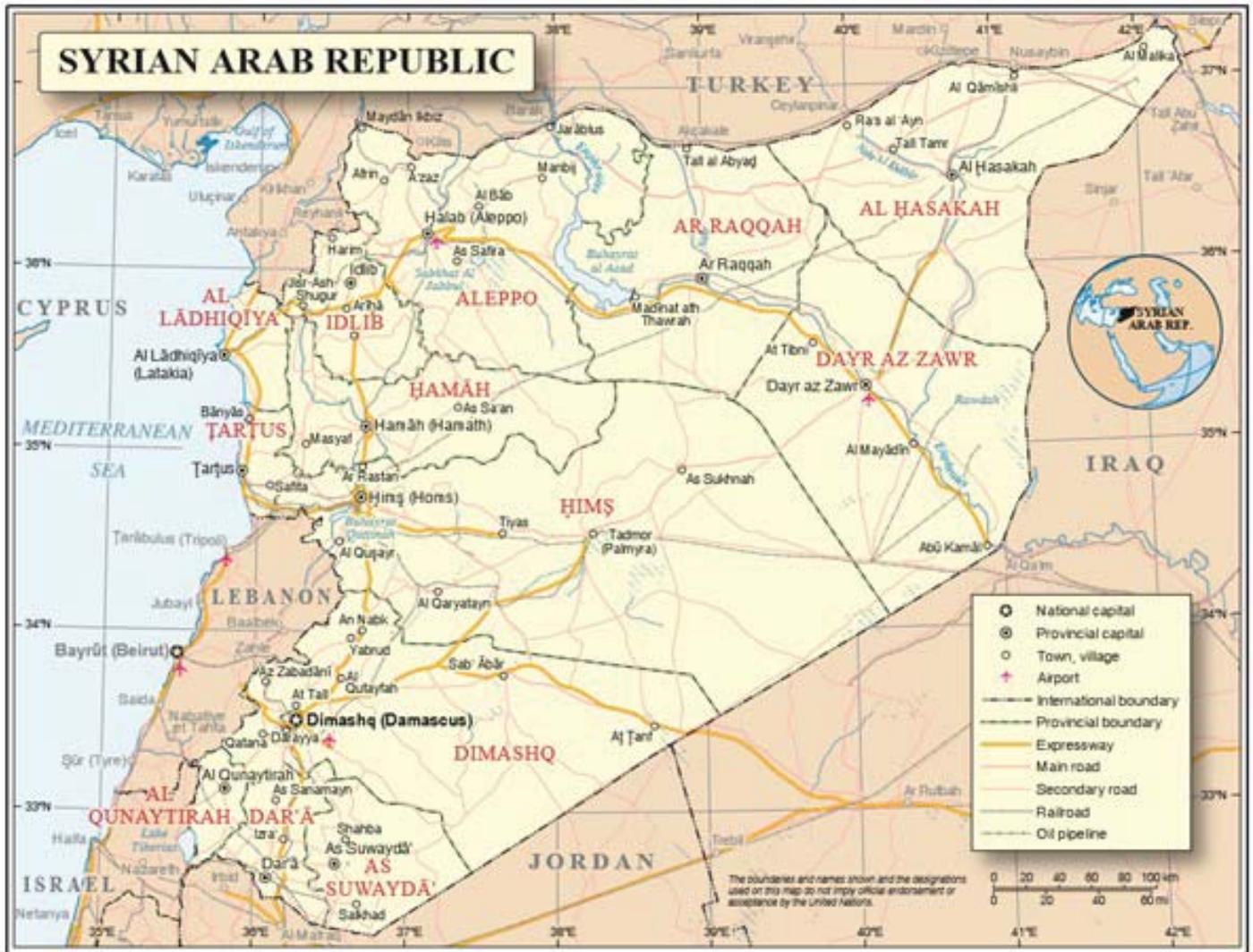
[Back to Contents](#)

¹³⁷ EASO, ‘Syria: IDPs, returnees and internal mobility’, (p33-34), 3 April 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸ EASO, ‘Syria: Targeting of Individuals’, 10 March 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁹ EASO, ‘Syria: IDPs, returnees and internal mobility’, 3 April 2020, [url](#)

Annex A: Map of Syria



Map No. 4204 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
April 2012

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

140

140 UN, 'Map of the Syrian Arab Republic', April 2012, [url](#)

Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToRs, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Overview of conflict
 - Reasons
 - Dates and key events
- Protagonists
 - State
 - Non-State
- Humanitarian situation
- Levels of violence
- Freedom of movement

[Back to Contents](#)

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[Back to Contents](#)

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[Back to Contents](#)

Version control

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **4.0**
- valid from **10 August 2020**

Changes from last version of this note

Updated COI.

[Back to Contents](#)