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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment please email Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca.

13 August 2014

SYR104921.E

Syria: Compulsory military service, including age of recruitment, length of service; occasions where proof of military service status is required; whether the government can recall individuals who have already completed their compulsory military service; penalties for evasion (2008-July 2014)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. General Information

The Syrian Constitution declares that "[c]ompulsory military service shall be a sacred duty and is regulated by a law" (Syria 2012, Art. 46). Sources indicate that military service is mandatory for all Syrian males (7 Days 8 Feb. 2014; US 20 June 2014; AP 6 June 2012) over the age of 18 (*ibid.*; US 20 June 2014). According to the US Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook*, women do not have to perform compulsory service, but may volunteer to serve (*ibid.*).

2. Period of Service

Sources specify that the compulsory service period was reduced from 21 to 18 months in 2011 (US 10 Mar. 2014; SANA 19 Mar. 2011; Reuters 19 Mar. 2011). According to Reuters, this reduction in the service period was "seen as an attempt to address ... discontent" in the population, "especially among the youth who resent state tactics to bring them into service" (*ibid.*). However, two sources note that men who have not completed the fifth grade will continue to perform 21 months of service (US 10 Mar. 2014; SANA 19 Mar. 2011).

According to two sources, military service does not go beyond the age of 42 (VDC 30 July 2014; AFP 27 Mar. 2012). However, in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a Syrian activist and researcher based in Washington DC [1] stated, speaking in his own capacity, that the upper age limit was 50 years of age (Activist 23 July 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Postponement of Service

Sources indicate that military service is postponed for individuals undertaking postsecondary studies (Activist 23 July 2014; Reuters 4 Sept. 2012; AP 6 June 2012). The Associated Press (AP) states that university and technical school students can delay their service and do "slightly less time" (*ibid.*). According to sources, some students try to prolong their studies to avoid military service (Activist 23 July 2014; AP 6 June 2012). The activist added that the eldest male child of a family in which the father is deceased can also postpone his military service until his younger siblings are out of school, in order to support his family (Activist 23 July 2014). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to a Syria Arab News Agency (SANA) [2] article, Decree No. 33 issued on 6 August 2014 brought changes to the number of sons per family who are allowed to postpone their military service (SANA 6 Aug. 2014). While, prior to the issuance of the decree, only one son per family could postpone his service, the new provisions are as follows:

- One son is allowed to postpone his service if the parents have two to four sons who are performing their service or all sons are enlisted as volunteers, conscripts or reservists;
- Two sons are allowed to postpone their service if the parents have five to eight sons who are performing their service;
- Three sons are allowed to postpone their service if the parents have nine or more sons who are performing their service (ibid.).

4. Exemptions

According to several sources, males who are only sons are exempt from military service (7 Days 8 Feb. 2014; Reuters 2 May 2014; US n.d.). The US Reciprocity Schedule states that mandatory service can also be waived if a man "has a brother who died on duty" but doesn't provide additional details (ibid.).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* adds that "[p]ersons of Syrian origin who were born in a foreign country but [are] able to demonstrate service in the army of the country of birth [are] exempt from military service" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 28). Likewise, the activist stated that individuals who have performed military service in another country are exempt from service in Syria (23 July 2014).

Men may also be exempt from military service for medical reasons (Activist 23 July 2014; Scholar 21 July 2014). Sources indicate that medical evaluations are conducted by evaluation committees (Activist 23 July 2014; Scholar 21 July 2014). A scholar, who is also the executive director of the Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic Studies [3], as well as the activist, both noted that those with medical exemptions may also be assigned to administrative duties rather than combat roles (Activist 23 July 2014; Scholar 21 July 2014). Both sources mentioned that individuals may offer bribes to medical evaluators in order to be granted medical exemptions or to be placed in administrative positions (Activist 23 July 2014; Scholar 21 July 2014).

4.1 Exemption Fees

Sources report that individuals in certain circumstances may pay a fee to be exempted from military service (7 Days 8 Feb. 2014; US 27 Feb. 2014, 28). According to sources, this exemption fee is called *badal* (Activist 23 July 2014; Scholar 21 July 2014; Carnegie Middle East Center 7 June 2013). The activist stated that the term could literally be translated as "alternative" or "replacement" (Activist 23 July 2014).

A March 2013 article in the *New York Times* reports that exemption fees have become an important source of income for the government (*The New York Times* 12 Mar. 2013). The article stated that, "[s]ince early in the [unrest that began in 2011], large numbers of military-age men have paid thousands of dollars to legally avoid military service" (ibid.). *Country Reports 2013* states that the possibility of paying an exemption fee "tended to vary by ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Wealthy Alawi and Shia were the most able to avoid military service" (US 27 Feb. 2014, 28). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The activist was unsure of the exact cost of the *badal* for residents in Syria, but stated that it was "very high" and "higher" than the fees for Syrians residing outside the country (Activist 23 July 2014). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In June 2012, AP reported that "Syrians born abroad can pay \$500 not to serve, and those with residency in other countries can pay \$4,000 to \$5,000, depending on their location" (AP 6 June 2012). A travel advisory for Syria published by the US Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs stated that the "amount of the exemption fee depends upon a combination of factors" and provides the following details on the cost of exemptions for Syrians residing outside of Syria:

- For Syrians (including U.S. citizens of either Syrian or Palestinian origin) born outside of Syria and residing abroad until the age of 18, the fee for exemption from military service is \$500;
- For Syrians born in Syria, but who left Syria before reaching the age of 11 and who have resided outside Syria for more than 15 years, the fee for exemption from military service is \$5,000;
- For persons who do not meet the above criteria, but who reside abroad, the fee for exemption from military service is \$6,500. (US 10 Mar. 2014)

In a June 2013 article on the conflict in Syria, a scholar with the Carnegie Middle East Center, "an independent policy research institute based in Beirut" that provides "in-depth analysis of the political, socioeconomic, and security issues facing the Middle East and North Africa" (Carnegie Middle East Center n.d.), states that in May 2013, the exemption fee was raised from \$5000 to \$15,000 for Syrians living abroad (Carnegie Middle East Center 7 June 2013). A February 2014 article from 7 Days, a Dubai-based news website, mentions that "men can pay 36,000 [United Arab Emirates Dirhams] (\$10,000) if they have been living abroad for four years and want to avoid military service" (7 Days 8 Feb. 2014). 7 Days notes that "[t]he number of men paying the fee has soared since the Syrian civil war began as they desperately try to avoid having to return home" (8 Feb. 2014). According to the Carnegie Middle East Center article, the fee increase "may be an attempt to derive revenue from the many Syrians who prefer to avoid combat without incurring penalties for desertion should the regime ultimately win" (7 June 2013).

However, Decree No. 33 issued on 6 August 2014 brought changes to the exemption fees:

[The exemption fee] for individuals with residence of no less than 4 years abroad is now USD 8,000, reducing the amount and time from the previous amount of USD 15,000 for five years, while compensation for individuals who were born in an Arab or foreign country until they turned 18 is set at USD 2,500 from the previous amount of USD 500. (SANA 6 Aug. 2014)

In addition, the decree stipulates that individuals who exceeded the age of mandatory service and who did not serve for reasons other than the statutory exemptions outlined in the decree have to pay an exemption fee of US\$8,000 (ibid.).

5. Proof of Military Service

The activist said that there is a military ID and a military service book (activist 20 Aug. 2014). He explained that when they reach the age of 18 years old, all males go to the general recruitment agency, where they are interviewed, they have their photo taken, and they undertake blood tests, among other procedures (ibid.). They are then issued a military service book (ibid.). The activist added that "[e]ven those who will end up exempt from service for any reason" receive the military service book, within which their exemption will be written and stamped (ibid.).

The activist said that the military ID is given "only" to those who perform the military service (ibid.). He explained that when someone starts their military service, they go to the same general recruitment agency, where they turn in their civilian ID and military service book, and immediately receive a military ID before being sent to their unit to perform their service (ibid.).

The activist further explained that when completing their service, individuals are given a "release" form (ibid.). Individuals must then go the general recruitment agency, where they turn in their military ID along with the release form, and where they are then given back their civilian ID and military service book (ibid.). The military service book is stamped to indicate that service is completed and that the individual is released (ibid.).

The activist said that the service book is similar in format to a passport, and that it contains personal information such as name, date of birth and a thumbprint (ibid. 23 July 2014). He also explained that if the individual is a student, the educational institution will enter the relevant information in the service book so that it can be shown to military authorities (ibid.).

Similarly, the US Reciprocity Schedule states that men who perform military service receive a military document, adding that

Syrian males keep this document after their discharge from the service and present it again when they are called up for reserve. This document records the dates, all events and duties of the bearer from the first day in military service until the time of discharge from duty. If this document is lost or unavailable, military statements can be obtained from the Mobilization Department. (US n.d.)

5.1 Use of Checkpoints

Sources report that men are subject to checks of whether they have served (Scholar 21 July 2014; Reuters 4 Sept. 2012; AP 6 June 2012). In a September 2012 report, Reuters stated that

[r]esidents in Damascus say checkpoints across the city now inspect young men's IDs to check they are not fleeing army service or have not been called up from the reserves. Some deserters dare not leave their homes, fearing neighbors who might report them. (Reuters 4 Sept. 2012)

A February 2013 report for the UN Human Rights Council by the independent international commission of inquiry on Syria states that

with many young men evading official conscription systems, the Government is enlisting young men arrested at checkpoints or during attacks on civilian areas. As Government control over Syrian territory shrinks, checkpoints play ever more important roles in the relationship between Government and people. (UN 5 Feb. 2013, 83)

In June 2012, AP stated that some young men "hide out in opposition areas in Syria, avoiding checkpoints where they could be jailed or conscripted. Others flee the country, opting, at least for now, for an impoverished existence far from their families" (6 June 2012).

6. Mobilization Following Military Service

Sources indicate that the government can recall those who have performed their mandatory military service to active duty (VDC 30 July 2014; Reuters 4 Sept. 2012). According to AFP, "Syrian authorities have the right in the event of war or a declared state of emergency to mobilize all males between the ages of 18 and 42 who have completed their military service" (27 Mar. 2012). Reuters adds that, "Syrian law requires men who served in the military to get army approval for passports, state jobs and even marriage licenses, which makes it more difficult for reservists to avoid a call-up" (Reuters 4 Sept. 2012). Both the scholar and activist stated that the government recalls individuals to service on national security grounds (Activist 23 July 2014; Scholar 21 July 2014).

According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, some Syrians fled the country "because they feared being drafted, despite having already completed their compulsory military service" (27 Mar. 2012). According to the activist, there are no limits to service once someone has been recalled to active duty, which he believes may be the reason for the many desertions and attempts to evade military service that occur (Activist 23 July 2014). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

7. Travel Restrictions

According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, in March 2012, the government officially barred all men between the ages of 18 and 42 from travel outside the country (27 Mar. 2012). However, Agence France-Presse (AFP) said that these men can travel, but need prior authorization from authorities, noting that "[t]he travel ban until now had only applied to men who had not completed their two-year compulsory military service" (AFP 27 Mar. 2012).

According to a March 2013 article from the *Globe and Mail*, "[c]ountless times since the anti-regime revolt's outbreak two years ago, young Syrian men have been prevented from leaving the country at borders to Jordan and Lebanon" (*The Globe and Mail* 11 Mar. 2013). The article added that "in many cases no official notice [of a travel ban] had been given" (ibid.). *The Globe and Mail* added that "[s]ome Syrians believe the regime is preventing them from departing Syria in order to use them to fight rebels" (ibid.).

8. Penalties

Sources state that those who try to evade military service face imprisonment or forced conscription (Middle East Voices 16 Jan. 2013; Scholar 21 July 2014). Reuters reports that food aid may reportedly be withheld from the families of those who have evaded conscriptions (19 Mar. 2011).

The activist stated that deserters can face 260 days in jail and a fine but in practice, the fine is usually dropped and in some cases ordinary deserters are often simply sent back to their units (Activist 23 July 2014). However, according to the activist, deserters, especially deserting officers or "higher ranking" soldiers, may be seen as "treasonous and against the regime," and have been subjected to detention and "torture" (ibid.). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

SANA indicates that Decree No. 33 issued on 6 August 2014 stipulates conditions under which state workers who do not join their unit for mandatory or reserve service could be dismissed from their employment (SANA 6 Aug. 2014).

AP reported that in June 2012, the Assad government issued an amnesty giving draft-dodgers who were still in the country 90 days to report for duty "without punishment," while those living abroad were given 120 days (6 June 2012). The scholar also mentioned that the Assad government issued amnesties, but could not provide further details on their length and conditions (Scholar 21 July 2014).

According to 7 Days, "[t]he Syrian government will not renew the passport of any man who does not either pay the [exemption] fee or serve in the army" (8 Feb. 2014). The activist stated that a passport will only be issued for two years for a man who has not completed his military service (Activist 23 July 2014).

Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Associated Press (AP),

[m]ost draft-dodger exiles say they won't return to Syria until the regime falls, and many won't renew expired passports, fearing their embassies will confiscate them until they report for duty. This leaves them stranded abroad, sometimes as risk of arrest and deportation. (6 June 2012)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The activist has testified before the United Nations Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in Syria and serves as the Executive Director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC). SJAC is a non-profit NGO that is registered in The Hague, Netherlands, with offices in Washington, DC (SJAC n.d.). It "works to ensure that human rights violations in Syria are comprehensively documented and preserved for use in transitional justice and peace-building" (ibid.). The SJAC provides resources and technical support to documenters inside Syria, and coordinates with other organizations and individuals who have similar goals (ibid.).

[2] SANA is Syria's national official news agency (SANA n.d.).

[3] The scholar has also served as a fellow at multiple institutions that conduct research on Syria and the Middle East (Scholar 21 July 2014).

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Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following organizations were unsuccessful: Damascus Center For Human Rights Studies; Syrian Center for Statistics and Research; Syrian Human Rights Committee; Syrian Network for Human Rights, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Internet sites, including: Action on Armed Violence; Amnesty International; Al-Akhbar English; Australia - RRT; Day Press; eoi.net; The Every Casualty Programme; Impunity Watch; International Coalition of Sites of Conscience; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; Lexadin; Middle East Eye; NATLEX; Stratfor; Support Kurds in Syria; Syria - Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice; Syria Justice and Accountability Centre; Syrian Center for Documentation; Syrian Center for Political & Strategic Studies; United Kingdom - Home Office; United Nations - IRIN, Refworld; War Resisters International; *The Washington Post*.

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