

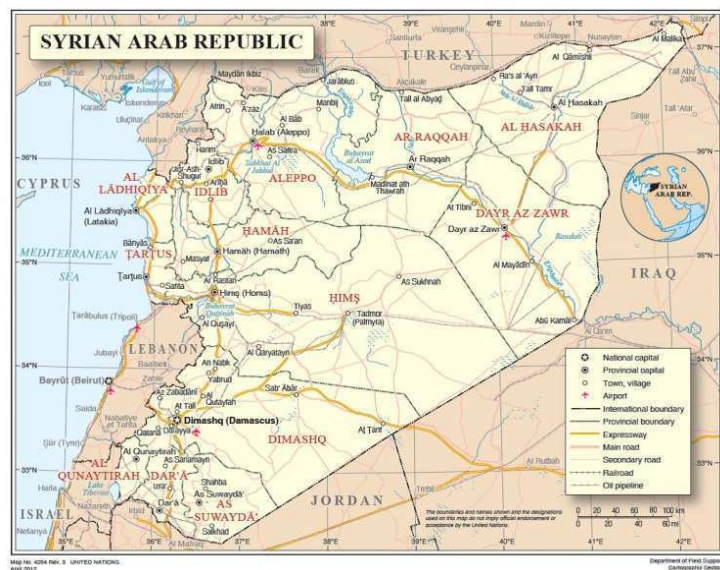
COUNTRY REPORT
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN REPORT (COI)

May 2020

Syria

Military Service

Report based on a
fact-finding mission
to Istanbul and Beirut
(17-25 February 2020)



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

The Danish
Immigration Service

© 2020 The Danish Immigration Service

The Danish Immigration Service
Ryesgade 53
2100 Copenhagen
Denmark

Phone: +45 35 36 66 00
newtodenmark.dk

May 2020

All rights reserved to the Danish Immigration Service.

The publication can be downloaded for free at newtodenmark.dk
The Danish Immigration Service's publications can be quoted with clear source reference.

Front page map: Syrian Arab Republic, map No. 4204, Rev. 3 April 2012,
<https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf>

Contents

Disclaimer	3
Introduction and methodology	4
Abbreviations	6
Terminology	7
Executive summary	8
1. Current pattern of recruitment of conscripts and reservists to the SAA	9
1.1. Current demand and recruitment to the SAA	9
1.1.1. Military service in the SAA in Northeast Syria	10
1.2. Methods of recruitment of conscripts and reservists to the SAA	11
1.2.1. Recruitment through house raids.....	12
1.2.2. Recruitment from IDP camps.....	13
1.2.3. Recruitment through reconciliation agreements	13
1.3. Deployment of conscripts and reservists to the front.....	13
1.3.1. Indiscriminate deployment.....	13
1.3.2. Newly recruited conscripts	14
1.3.3. Deployment of men from reconciled areas to the front	15
1.3.4. Deployment of men from pro-government areas to the front	15
1.4. Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA.....	16
2. Implementation of the Military Service Law	18
2.1. Prevalence of recruitment of males under 18 and over 42.....	18
2.1.1. Recruitment of males under 18	18
2.2. Prevalence of conscription of only sons	20
2.3. Exemption due to medical conditions	21
2.4. The exemption fee.....	22
2.4.1. The exemption fee rules	22
2.4.2. The procedure and required documents.....	23
2.4.3. Implementation of the exemption fee procedure by the Syrian authorities	25
2.4.4. Extent of use of the exemption fee option.....	27
2.4.5. Respect of the exemption fee rules by the Syrian authorities	28
2.5. Possibility of visiting Syria for Syrian expatriates of military service age	29

2.5.1. Description of the procedure.....	29
2.5.2. Implementation of approval to visit Syria	30
3. Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion.....	31
3.1. Possible consequences of draft evasion.....	31
3.1.1. Amendment of Military Service Law regarding evaders over the age of 42	32
3.2. Possible consequences of desertion and defection	33
3.2.1. Prevalence of execution of deserters and defectors.....	34
3.3 Implementation of amnesties regarding draft evaders and deserters	35
3.3.1. Amnesty issued on 22 March 2020.....	36
3.4. Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters.....	36
3.4.1. Possible consequences for family members of draft evaders.....	36
3.4.2 Possible consequences for family members of deserters and defectors.....	37
Consulted sources	39
Oral sources	39
Written sources	40
Appendix 1: Meeting minutes.....	46
Appendix 2: Terms of Reference	93

Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.¹ The report is based on approved minutes from meetings with carefully selected sources. Statements from sources are used in the report and all statements are referenced.

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

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

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

¹ EASO, *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

Introduction and methodology

The report at hand focuses on military service in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) after the summer of 2018 when the SAA, with assistance from foreign allied forces and pro-government militia groups, regained control of most rebel-held areas in Syria.² The report specifically looks into:

- the current pattern of recruitment of conscripts and reservists to the SAA, including the demand for conscripts and reservists in the SAA, the methods of recruitment, deployment of conscripts and reservists to the front and final discharge;
- the implementation of the Syrian Military Service Law, including prevalence of recruitment of men under the age of 18 and over 42, and the implementation of rules regarding exemption from military service (only sons, medical condition and exemption by paying a fee);
- possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion, including the implementation of amnesties for draft evaders and deserters, as well as consequences for families of draft evaders and deserters.

The report is the product of a fact-finding mission conducted by the Country of Origin Information Office, Danish Immigration Service (DIS), to Istanbul, Turkey, and Beirut, Lebanon, from 17 to 25 February 2020. The purpose of the mission was to collect updated information on recurring issues in cases concerning Syrian asylum seekers in Denmark. The terms of reference (ToR) for the mission were written by DIS in consultation with the Secretariat of the Danish Refugee Appeals Board as well as an advisory group on COI (*'Referencegruppen'*).³ The terms of reference are included at the end of the report (Appendix 2).

In the planning phase of the mission, contacts were established with relevant sources. In the scope of compiling this report, the delegation consulted 16 interlocutors, comprising non-governmental organisations, analysts, journalists, a diplomatic source and a Syrian activist. The sources interviewed were selected by the delegation based on the expertise, merit and role of each source relevant to the mission. In addition to the sources interviewed in Istanbul and Beirut, the delegation consulted sources via Skype in the USA, Germany, England, France and Turkey. Finally, one source was consulted through an e-mail interview.

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

² Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 6

³ The group consists of the Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International in Denmark, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Dignity, representatives of two Christian Organisations ("Europa Missionen" and "Åbne Døre"), the National Commissioner of the Police and the Danish Bar and Law Society (representing asylum lawyers)

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

The sources consulted were informed about the purpose of the mission and that their statements would be included in a public report. The minutes from the meetings with the sources were forwarded to them for their approval, giving them a chance to amend, comment or correct their statements. Fifteen sources approved their statements, whereas one source did not reply to the request of approval. The source was informed, however, that in case the delegation did not receive a response to its request for approval within a specific deadline, the delegation would consider the minutes approved. The minutes are thus used in the report.

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

During the interviews, the sources highlighted issues that are not addressed in ToR. Since these issues could be relevant to refugee status determination, they are included in the meeting minutes in Appendix 1 but not addressed in the report.

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

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

The research and editing of this report was finalised by 11 May 2020.

The report is available on the website of [DIS](#), thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

Abbreviations

DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
GoS	Government of Syria
HRW	Human Rights Watch
NDF	National Defence Forces
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
TDA	The Day After
ToR	Terms of Reference

Terminology

Military service	Military service is used broadly to cover both military service and reserve service, but, where sources allow, there is an attempt to distinguish between the two. ⁴
Conscript	A conscript is a Syrian male, above the age of 18, currently serving his military service in the SAA. ⁵
Reservist	A reservist is a Syrian soldier currently serving his reserve duty in the SAA. Reservists have previously completed their mandatory military service in Syria, but have been called up for reserve service in the SAA. ⁶
Draft evader	A draft evader is a Syrian male, above the age of 18, who has avoided being drafted into the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) either by hiding from the Syrian authorities in Syria or by fleeing Syria. ⁷
Deserter	A deserter is a former SAA soldier (e.g. a conscript, a non-commissioned officer (corporal or sergeant) or an officer) who has left his post or unit in the SAA and is thus no longer in active military service. ⁸
Defector	A defector is a former SAA soldier who has left the SAA and defected to an armed opposition group in Syria. ⁹

⁴ Denmark, DIS, *Syria: Issues regarding military service*, 24 October 2019, [url](#), p.5; Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁵ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁷ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁸ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹ Al Jazeera, *Interactive: Tracking Syria's defections*, 30 July 2012, [url](#)

Executive summary

Since summer 2018, recruitment to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has increased due to access to more manpower in the recaptured areas and the high demand for manpower for the current fighting at the Idlib front. Recruitment of conscripts and reservists takes place at checkpoints, government institutions, border crossings and in IDP camps. In recaptured areas, recruitment can moreover take place through house raids. The GoS does not recruit men for obligatory military service in the Kurdish areas in which it has a presence.

Everyone in the ranks of the SAA is at risk of being deployed to the front regardless of their experience, qualifications, religious background and area of origin or residence.

Since 2018, there have been cases of discharge of groups of soldiers, e.g. conscripts, from the SAA.

There is no prevalence of recruitment of males under the age of 18 to the SAA. Neither have men over the age of 42 generally been recruited. The exemption of only sons is implemented by the Government of Syria (GoS). Persons are exempted for medical reasons; however, the criteria for medical exemptions are not always clear and fixed.

The rules for exemption by paying a fee are implemented. The Syrian authorities generally respect the exemption fee rules, and people who pay the exemption fee have not faced any issues after returning to Syria.

Draft evaders who are caught by the Syrian authorities are sent directly to military service; some after a short period of detention or imprisonment. Depending on the reason for desertion, the punishment for deserting ranges between a few years of imprisonment to execution. The information on the implementation and scope of the general presidential amnesties issued by the GoS for draft evaders and deserters is limited. The amnesties are generally not considered respected by the GoS.

In general, families of draft evaders do not face any consequences as a result of a family member's draft evasion. However, there have been cases of house searches and pressure on such families by the Syrian authorities. Families of deserters still risk being subjected to different forms of violations and abuse by the Syrian authorities as a result of their family member's desertion, depending on a number of factors.

1. Current pattern of recruitment of conscripts and reservists to the SAA

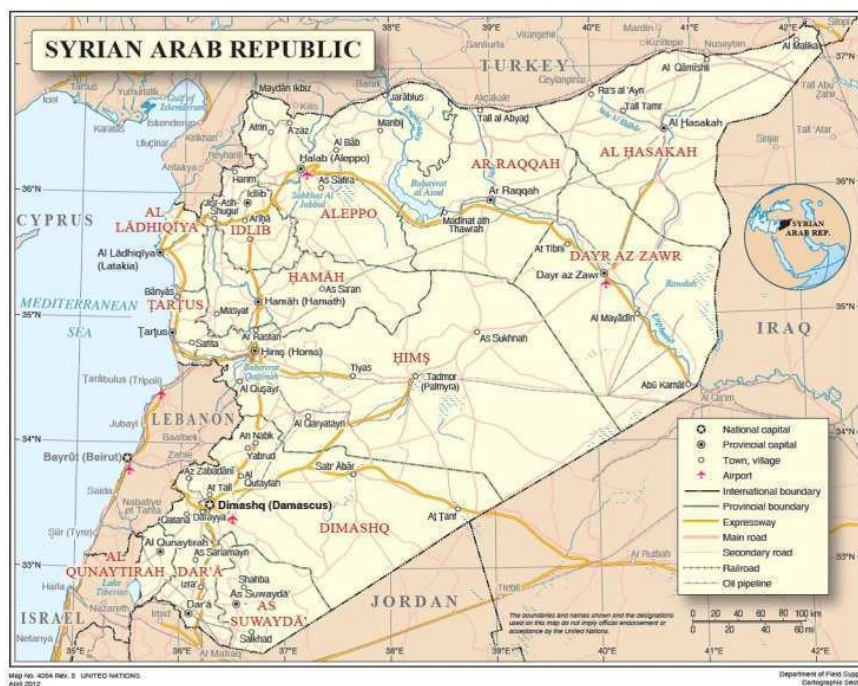
The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has been fighting for the survival of the government of Syria (GoS) over the course of the Syrian civil war. The SAA has changed and adapted throughout this war to keep the Assad government in power and prevent the state from collapsing.¹⁰

1.1. Current demand and recruitment to the SAA

Most sources, who had information about the level of recruitment, stated that recruitment to the SAA had somewhat increased within the past year or two.¹¹

The increase is due to the fact that the SAA recaptured many areas, e.g. during summer 2018, and hence gained access to more manpower.¹² The SAA has especially been conscripting men from post-reconciled areas.¹³ On the other hand, in an EASO report from March 2020, Christopher Kozak from Institute for the Study of War assessed that the SAA is conscripting any military-aged man that the GoS can get its hands on.¹⁴

An additional explanation for the increase in recruitment is the high demand for conscripts and reservists in the SAA due to the current fighting at the Idlib front.¹⁵ Omran Studies mentioned that the SAA was facing shortages on many of its frontlines including Deir Ezzor.¹⁶



¹⁰ Carnegie Middle East Center, *Russia and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities*, 26 March 2020, [url](#)

¹¹ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 29; Fabrice Balanche: 87-88; Asaad Hanna: 231; TDA: 113; Western diplomat: 295; Carnegie Middle East Center, *Russia and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities*, 26 March 2020, [url](#)

¹² Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 29; Jusoor for Studies: 181; Omran Studies: 202; Asaad Hanna: 231

¹³ Gregory Waters: 2, 4; Fabrice Balanche: 87; Omran Studies: 202; TDA: 113

¹⁴ EASO, Country of Origin Report, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 33

¹⁵ Gregory Waters: 3; Fabrice Balanche: 87; TDA: 113; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 254; Western diplomat: 295

¹⁶ Omran Studies: 205

Moreover, the SAA has increased recruitment, because the SAA soldiers who have been fighting since 2011 are tired and want to be discharged.¹⁷

However, not all sources stated that recruitment had increased. Omran Studies specified that although the SAA had recruited many new conscripts from recaptured areas, there had been no new large conscription campaign in areas that were under government control before 2018.¹⁸ Other sources estimated that recruitment to the SAA has been stable within the past year.¹⁹ The SAA is currently recruiting conscripts but not to the same extent as previously, such as in 2015 and 2016, when the GoS was significantly weaker.²⁰ Likewise, Christopher Kozak stated in the EASO report from March 2020 that conscription intake remains relatively the same: mass conscription drives and arrests in Damascus and in core areas of the Syrian coast as well as in Homs and Hama governorates are continuing. There have also been conscription activities in reconciled areas.²¹

Finally, two sources stated that recruitment had in fact decreased. A humanitarian organisation and Watan specifically pointed out that recruitment had decreased in the past one or two years as the SAA was only engaged at the one remaining front in Idlib.²²

1.1.1. Military service in the SAA in Northeast Syria

In November 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the GoS reached an agreement in Northeast Syria which implied the deployment of GoS troops to previously Kurdish-controlled areas. Since then, there have been reports of Syrian Kurds from the area fleeing to Iraq out of fear of being conscripted to the SAA.²³ Against this background, DIS consulted the sources on whether the GoS had reintroduced compulsory military service in Northeast Syria.

According to the consulted sources, the GoS has not begun conscripting in the north-eastern Kurdish areas in which it has a presence.²⁴ Although the GoS does have a presence in Northeast Syria, it does not have sufficient control or the administrative authority to conscript men to the SAA in those areas.²⁵

A western diplomat stated, however, that there had been unconfirmed stories of forced conscription of Arabs and that the Syrian intelligence services had been trying to convince Arab tribes in these areas to leave the SDF and join either the SAA, pro-government militias or the intelligence services.²⁶

Other sources stated that recruitment to the SAA did take place in these areas but on a voluntary basis. Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that a majority of the locals residing in the small areas under SAA control in Hasakah and Qamishli were pro-government, and thus voluntarily applied to join the SAA.²⁷ Gregory Waters likewise stated that the GoS had continuously been recruiting locals, who wanted to join the SAA voluntarily, in the

¹⁷ Fabrice Balanche: 88; Western diplomat: 295

¹⁸ Omran Studies: 202

¹⁹ Gregory Waters: 1; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 57; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 254

²⁰ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 57; Rami: 152

²¹ EASO, Country of Origin Report, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 33

²² Watan: 137; A humanitarian organisation: 317

²³ BAMF, Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, *Briefing Notes*, 21 October 2019, [url](#), p. 6; The Defense Post, *Fearing conscription into Assad's army, Syrian Kurds flee to Iraq*, 12 December 2019, [url](#)

²⁴ Gregory Waters: 6; Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 33; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 59; Fabrice Balanche: 89; TDA: 114; Watan: 140; Jusoor for Studies: 186; Omran Studies: 213; Asaad Hanna: 232; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 258; Western diplomat: 296; A humanitarian organisation: 320

²⁵ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 33; TDA: 114; Asaad Hanna: 232; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 258

²⁶ Western diplomat: 296

²⁷ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 258

areas under its control in Hasakah and Qamishli.²⁸ Elizabeth Tsurkov specified that some Arabs who lived in SDF-controlled areas had joined the SAA, because they expected the GoS to return to their areas. Thus, they wanted to demonstrate their loyalty to the GoS by enlisting in the SAA.²⁹

According to SNHR, the GoS has established several recruitment centres for conscription and volunteering to the SAA in the recaptured areas in Northeast Syria, and the GoS has opened up the possibility “to sort out one’s affairs” in Hasakah to motivate young Kurdish men to enlist in the SAA.³⁰

In the EASO report from March 2020, Christopher Kozak stated that the GoS had conducted conscription campaigns in Qamishli in Hasakah governorate where the GoS retained partial control. However, the SDF has, since November 2019, been able to prevent the GoS from conducting conscription activities in those areas.³¹

1.2. Methods of recruitment of conscripts and reservists to the SAA

When conscripting new recruits, the GoS sends military service notifications to men, who have reached the military service age, requesting them to enlist for military service.³²

The GoS has also set up recruitment branches and offices in former opposition-held areas, such as East Ghouta.³³ Men, who have deserted or evaded military service, can go to the recruitment centres and sort out their affairs in order to no longer being wanted by the security forces.³⁴

Furthermore, conscription takes place at government institutions, for instance, when young men go to renew their papers.³⁵ In former opposition-controlled areas such as Rural Damascus, the SAA sends lists of people wanted for conscription to the police in the area. These lists are then put up at state institutions and given to officers at checkpoints.³⁶

In addition to checkpoints and government institutions, conscription takes place at universities, and men are likewise being arrested and conscripted in hospitals.³⁷

Conscription moreover takes place at border crossings.³⁸ Officers at checkpoints and at the border have access to a centralized database containing the names of those wanted for military service, and men, who are e.g. in Lebanon, can pay bribes to check whether their names are registered in this database before returning to Syria.³⁹ According to SAWA, all Syrian men in the military service age fear being conscripted at the border, if they try to return, including men who have the right to be exempted and men trying to make use of a temporary amnesty from military service.⁴⁰

²⁸ Gregory Waters: 6

²⁹ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 59

³⁰ SNHR: 340, 348. For more information about the process of ‘*Sorting out one’s affairs*’ (*taswiyat al-wada*) with the Syrian authorities, please see p. 24, section 2.4.3.1., as well as: EASO, *Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), pp.16-18

³¹ EASO, Country of Origin Report, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 33

³² HRW: 45; Fabrice Balanche: 98; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 271

³³ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 38

³⁴ SNHR: 348

³⁵ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 66; Asaad Hanna: 237; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 269

³⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 270

³⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 66; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 269

³⁸ Rami: 159; Western diplomat: 301

³⁹ Rami: 159

⁴⁰ SAWA, *Unpacking Return – Syrian Refugees’ Conditions and Concerns*, February 2019, [url](#)

According to a circular issued in 2019, men wanted for military service, who are returning to Syria, are granted a period of 15 days to show up at the recruitment office and sort out their affairs before joining the SAA.⁴¹ As the Syrian activist Rami explained, the GoS is thus being more lenient today and gives those wanted for military service a period of time to come back home and prepare themselves to join the SAA. Previously, these men would have been taken straight from the border to military service.⁴² Omran Studies, however, knew of cases where Syrian men had been taken directly from Damascus International Airport to military service and sent to the frontlines in Deir Ezzor without prior training.⁴³

1.2.1. Recruitment through house raids

Recruitment also takes place through campaigns and raids.⁴⁴ Sources differed, however, on whether recruitment to the SAA still takes place through house raids.

Some sources particularly stated that house raids are still taking place in former opposition-held areas, such as Rural Damascus, Aleppo and Daraa.⁴⁵

However, a humanitarian organisation stated that the military police is not involved in recruiting men for military service in former opposition-controlled areas because the GoS is trying to avoid provoking the locals. Recruitment instead goes through the local *mukhtar* [i.e. mayor] who delivers the military service notifications in former opposition-held areas.⁴⁶

Fabrice Balanche similarly stated that the GoS no longer engaged in large house searching campaigns in former opposition-held areas because in these areas, especially in those with a Sunni majority population, the GoS might thereby provoke the local community hence risk creating new uprisings. Also in pro-government areas, such as Latakia and Tartous, the authorities no longer conducts house searches to find and conscript draft evaders and deserters, because these communities feel that they have already provided too much manpower to the SAA during the conflict.⁴⁷

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, in Damascus City, the SAA does not conduct house arrests, and many young men thus succeed in evading military service in Damascus City solely by avoiding checkpoints. The source knew of three young men who had been living in Damascus throughout the four years that they had been evading conscription. It was possible for them to go to work and return back home, as long as they avoided going through checkpoints and being out at night or passing by a police station.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Sinmarnew.com حوار خاص “اللواء ناجي تركي النمير مدير إدارة الهجرة والجوازات يتحدث لموقع سنمار سورية الاخباري في” [Major General Naji Turki Al-Numair, Director of the Immigration and Passports Department, speaks to the Syrian Sinmar news website in an exclusive interview], 7 May 2019, [url](#)

⁴² Rami: 160

⁴³ Omran Studies: 212. Despite a written request to Omran Studies for further information about the circumstances of these cases, including when they took place, DIS did not receive any information on this from the source.

⁴⁴ Gregory Waters: 15; TDA: 117; Rami: 158

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 65-66; TDA: 117-118; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 271-272; SNHR: 347

⁴⁶ A humanitarian organisation: 328

⁴⁷ Fabrice Balanche: 100

⁴⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 271-272

1.2.2. Recruitment from IDP camps

In addition to the above-mentioned recruitment practices, some sources spoke of recruitment to the SAA in IDP camps. After the GoS recaptured East Ghouta in Rural Damascus in May 2018, men of military service age were put in displacement camps and conscripted to the SAA directly from these detention centres.⁴⁹

Elizabeth Tsurkov explained that during the offensive on East Ghouta in 2018, the authorities arrested people who tried to escape the area and took them directly to detention centres where they underwent interrogation. Many men stayed there for months, basically in detention under harsh conditions, until some “volunteered” to enlist in the SAA, and some were conscripted to military service.⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch stated that those men, who had been conscripted to the SAA directly from the displacement centres in East Ghouta, were sent to military training camps and then subsequently on to the frontlines.⁵¹

The Syrian activist Rami had heard of cases from Aleppo, where people had been put in large camps, until they reconciled with the GoS, and then sent to military training camps.⁵²

1.2.3. Recruitment through reconciliation agreements

Sources stated that many men living in former opposition-held areas have been recruited through reconciliation agreements.⁵³

Men in reconciled areas were usually given six months grace, as stipulated in the reconciliation agreements, before they had to serve.⁵⁴ However, the GoS repeatedly violated this six months grace period and arrested and conscripted men before the six months were over.⁵⁵

Most men who had signed the reconciliation deals did not receive any documentation that could prove that there was a six months period before they could be drafted to military service. And in those rare cases, in which men had received a paper, they reported violations of the grace period.⁵⁶

Additionally, Fabrice Balanche stated that the GoS, in spite of what was stipulated in the reconciliation agreements, had moreover deployed some of these men to the frontline before the six months period was over.⁵⁷

1.3. Deployment of conscripts and reservists to the front

1.3.1. Indiscriminate deployment

Everyone in the ranks of the SAA is at risk of being deployed to the front regardless of their qualifications, religious background or area of origin or residence, and both experienced and inexperienced SAA soldiers have been deployed to the front.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ HRW: 46; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 68; Fabrice Balanche: 101; For more information on IDP camps in East Ghouta: see MEI and Etana, *Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta*, 14 May 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 68

⁵¹ HRW: 46

⁵² Rami: 158

⁵³ Gregory Waters: 17; HRW: 47; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 67; Fabrice Balanche: 97; Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters*, July 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 67

⁵⁵ HRW: 47; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 67; Fabrice Balanche: 97; Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters*, July 2018, [url](#);

⁵⁶ HRW: 47

⁵⁷ Fabrice Balanche: 97

Furthermore, within the past year, the SAA has been rotating its units.⁵⁹ Therefore, men not currently participating in active fighting have no guarantee that they will continue to serve away from the front, unless they have very good connections or pay a bribe to serve away from the front.⁶⁰ Gregory Waters mentioned a case of a man who was in the 4th division and whose family was Sunni but very well connected within the military. This person managed to avoid being deployed to the front and instead serve at the motor pool because he was a mechanic. Waters noted that this would not have been possible previously when the demand for manpower was higher.⁶¹

Both conscripts and reservists are being deployed to the front.⁶² Suhail Al-Ghazi stated, however, that none of those men, who had completed their military service before the Syrian conflict began and who had been called up for reserve duty, had been deployed to the front.⁶³ Fabrice Balanche stated that although both conscripts and reservists are being deployed to the front in Idlib, conscripts outnumber reservists considerably.⁶⁴ Gregory Waters likewise assumed that the deployment of reservists to the frontline is minimal.⁶⁵ Omran Studies had heard of reservists who had managed to bribe themselves out of being deployed to the frontline and instead served in urban areas.⁶⁶

Additionally, SNHR explained that deserters, who have reconciled with the GoS, are also being deployed to fight for the SAA in areas that are under opposition control.⁶⁷ Waters further mentioned that draft evaders are being deployed to the front as well.⁶⁸

Sara Kayyali from Human Rights Watch, who had focused her research on areas retaken by the GoS in 2018, such as areas in southern Syria, Rural Damascus, Homs and Deir Ezzor, stated that deployment of conscripted returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to the Idlib front also occurred.⁶⁹

1.3.2. Newly recruited conscripts

Some sources stated that even newly recruited conscripts with very little training are being deployed to the front.⁷⁰ Deployment of newly recruited conscripts is also confirmed in a report by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SADC) from July 2019. According to this SADC report, poorly trained young men from reconciled areas have been used by their commanders as cannon fodder to face massive counter-attacks by rebel forces. This happened, for instance, in northern Hama in May 2019.⁷¹

⁵⁸ Gregory Waters: 7-8, 10; Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 35; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 60-61; Watan: 142; Jusoor for Studies: 182; Asaad Hanna: 233; Western diplomat: 298; SNHR: 342, 344-345. Regarding the question of area, SNHR stated that in one place, however, the area of residence determines the place of deployment. In Suweida, which has a Druze majority population, conscripts serve only in Suweida and are not deployed to fight at the front (SNHR: 345)

⁵⁹ Gregory Waters: 13; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 61

⁶⁰ Gregory Waters 12; Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 36; Elizabeth Tsurkov 62; Fabrice Balanche: 99

⁶¹ Gregory Waters: 12

⁶² Gregory Waters: 7; Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 34; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 60; Fabrice Balanche: 90; Watan: 142; Jusoor for Studies: 182; Western diplomat: 298; SNHR: 342

⁶³ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 266

⁶⁴ Fabrice Balanche: 90

⁶⁵ Gregory Waters: 8

⁶⁶ Omran Studies: 223

⁶⁷ SNHR: 344

⁶⁸ Gregory Waters: 11

⁶⁹ HRW: 42

⁷⁰ Fabrice Balanche: 91; Jusoor for Studies: 182; SNHR: 342

⁷¹ SADC, *Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear*, 24 July 2019, [url](#)

On the other hand, there were sources who mentioned that newly conscripted, untrained or inexperienced soldiers were not sent to the frontline.⁷² According to Al-Ghazi, warfare experience is the main factor determining who gets deployed to the front, and he assessed that the SAA is mainly deploying soldiers who were conscripted during the first years of the Syrian conflict, since these are the most experienced fighters.⁷³

Having certain qualifications, e.g. in artillery, medicine, journalism (to cover the war from the GoS' perspective) or languages (Persian or Russian), were also mentioned by sources as determining whether a person was deployed to the frontline.⁷⁴

1.3.3. Deployment of men from reconciled areas to the front

Many men who were recruited from post-reconciled areas, including former opposition fighters, have been deployed to the front.⁷⁵

Omran Studies stated that former fighters from post-reconciled areas constitute a majority of the conscripted fighters fighting in Idlib.⁷⁶ Similarly, Fabrice Balanche stated that SAA frontline fighters are typically conscripts and experienced fighters from former rebel-held areas. Former rebel-fighters from Daraa, who had been promised not to be deployed outside of Daraa as part of the reconciliation agreement, were now being deployed to the front in Idlib.⁷⁷ According to a report by SADC from October 2019, most conscripted fighters from reconciled areas are being sent to the frontlines.⁷⁸

A humanitarian organisation had, however, not seen any information indicating that reconciled fighters from former opposition-controlled areas have been deployed to the front, and moreover stated that many of the former rebel fighters had been allowed to stay and serve in their area rather than being deployed to the front.⁷⁹

Gregory Waters stated that whether or not an SAA soldier is deployed to the front does not depend on his area of origin, but on whether his unit is deployed to the front; and the SAA does not compose units solely of men from reconciled areas.⁸⁰

1.3.4. Deployment of men from pro-government areas to the front

In the EASO report from March 2020, Christopher Kozak stated that most casualties at the frontlines still came primarily from Latakia, Tartous, western Hama, western Homs and Damascus governorates. He added that offensive capable units had primarily been drawn from the Syrian coast and western Homs and Hama

⁷² Rami: 154; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 260-263; A humanitarian organisation: 323

⁷³ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 260-263

⁷⁴ TDA: 115; Watan: 144-145

⁷⁵ Gregory Waters: 10; Fabrice Balanche: 92; Watan: 143; Omran Studies: 206-207; Western diplomat: 298; SNHR: 344; Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters*, July 2018, [url](#); Syria direct, *As losses mount in Idlib, Damascus sends conscripts from "reconciled" areas to the front*, 4 March 2020, [url](#); SADC, *Vengeance, repression, and fear: The reality behind Assad's promises to displaced Syrians*, October 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶ Omran Studies: 206-207

⁷⁷ Fabrice Balanche: 92

⁷⁸ SADC, *Vengeance, repression, and fear: The reality behind Assad's promises to displaced Syrians*, October 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁹ A humanitarian organisation: 318, 324

⁸⁰ Gregory Waters: 10

governorates, whereas many conscripts seen as less reliable had not been used for offensive operations.⁸¹ Kozak's information corroborated with that of two sources consulted during the mission.⁸²

Fabrice Balanche, on the other hand, stated that the GoS had been under pressure from Alawite and GoS heartlands in Latakia, Tartous, Hama and Homs to refrain from recruiting men from these communities to the same extent as before, as they have carried the largest burden throughout the war.⁸³

1.4. Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

All Syrian men in the military service age are required by law to serve in the military for a period of 18 to 21 months, depending on their level of education.⁸⁴ However, after the Syrian conflict broke out, the GoS stopped discharging men drafted for compulsory military service.⁸⁵ In 2018, those conscripts who had been serving since around 2010 were finally discharged.⁸⁶

Two military classes, Class 102 and 103, have been discharged.⁸⁷ Additionally, Class 248 and 249, consisting of officers, were discharged in 2019, after having served since 2012.⁸⁸ Palestinian units within the SAA have moreover been discharging conscripts who have served for a period of four to five years.⁸⁹

A western diplomat stated that a significant number of soldiers have been discharged and that discharge is taking place continuously, because the GoS has been facing severe pressures from the families of those soldiers who have been serving for up to eight or nine years.⁹⁰

Christopher Kozak similarly stated, in the EASO report of March 2020, that particularly due to public pressure from pro-government communities, the GoS had finally begun some discharge and had discharged some of the earliest classes of conscripts serving since early 2011. However, he also stated that lots of men continued serving in the military past the mandatory service period.⁹¹ SNHR stated that no regular final discharge of conscripts and/or reservists had taken place.⁹²

Two sources mentioned the possibility of being discharged by paying a bribe.⁹³ Technically and officially, these men who paid a bribe were still enrolled as conscripts in the SAA, but, in practice, they avoided military service and stayed at home.⁹⁴

In January 2019, the SAA issued an administrative order which, among other things demobilised reserve officers who had been in the SAA since they were conscripts, i.e. Class 250, 251 and 253.⁹⁵

⁸¹ EASO, Country of Origin Report, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 33

⁸² Jusoor for Studies: 183; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 261

⁸³ Fabrice Balanche: 94

⁸⁴ EASO, Country of Origin Report, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 31; Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrullering, utsettelse og fritak*, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 7

⁸⁵ Atlantic Council, *Forced conscription continues despite amnesty by Syrian Government*, 13 February 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁶ Gregory Waters: 14; HRW: 43; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 63; Fabrice Balanche: 95; TDA: 116; Watan: 146; Rami: 155; Omran Studies: 211; Asaad Hanna: 235; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 267; A humanitarian organisation: 325

⁸⁷ Tsurkov: 63; Rami: 155; Al-Ghazi: 267

⁸⁸ Rami: 156

⁸⁹ Humanitarian Organisation: 327

⁹⁰ Western diplomat: 299

⁹¹ EASO, Country of Origin Report, *Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 32

⁹² SNHR: 346

⁹³ Fabrice Balanche: 96; Omran Studies: 209

⁹⁴ Omran Studies: 209

Suhail-Al-Ghazi stated that reservists serving in infantry and logistics units had been discharged continuously since 2012, whereas reservists in armoured divisions were likely to be kept in active reserve duty for one to two years. He moreover added that most of the reservists, who had been recruited from former opposition-controlled areas, had been demobilized after a couple of months.⁹⁶

According to Jusoor for Studies, the SAA had announced, a couple of years ago, that it would discharge reservists who had been serving for many years, but that only some officers and no regular soldiers had actually been discharged because the SAA was continuously in need of soldiers. Jusoor for Studies assumed that the SAA would not discharge any regular soldier as long as the fight in Idlib was ongoing.⁹⁷

The Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that two administrative orders were issued on 29 March 2020, demobilizing reserve service soldiers and non-commissioned officers in addition to conscripts who have been serving in the army since 2013. The decision also demobilized the officers who served in the army as reservists for more than three years. The implementation date of the order was 7 April 2020.⁹⁸ Correspondingly, Elizabeth Tsurkov and Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that conscripts, who had been serving continuously since 2012-2013, reserve duty officers, who had served for over seven years, would be discharged.⁹⁹ Al-Ghazi furthermore explained that officers (between Captain and Colonel General), who had served for more than three years as reservists, as well as non-commissioned officers (between Warrant officer and Corporal) and foot soldiers, who had served for more than seven years as reservists, would be demobilized.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Almanar TV, إدارياً جديداً، تصدر أمرا إدارياً للجيش السوري [The General Army Command of SAA issues a new administrative order], January 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 268

⁹⁷ Jusoor for Studies: 187-188

⁹⁸ SANA, إنهاء الاحتفاظ والاستدعاء للضباط الاحتياطيين ممن أتموا ثلاث سنوات ولصف الضباط والأفراد ممن بلغت خدمتهم الاحتياطية الفعلية 7 سنوات [General Army Command: Ending the retention and recall of reserve officers, who have completed three years, and of non-commissioned officers and personnel whose actual reserve service has reached 7 years] 29 March 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 64; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 268. From the Facebook page of Class 102, it shows that this class has in fact been discharged, [url](#)

¹⁰⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 268

2. Implementation of the Military Service Law

As previously mentioned, the Syrian Military Law stipulates that all Syrian men, including registered Palestinians from Syria, between the ages of 18 to 42 are required to serve in the military for a period of 18 to 21 months, depending on their level of education.¹⁰¹ The Military Service Law permits certain categories of people to be exempted from military service, including men who are the only male child to their parents, unfit people due to health reasons, and those who pay an exemption fee. The law likewise stipulates that deferrals are only permitted for specific categories of people, for instance, certain students and individuals with specialised degrees, as well as people with certain temporary health conditions, and that deferrals have to be renewed every year.¹⁰²

The Syrian government has amended the Syrian Military Service Law multiple times during the Syrian conflict. After the summer of 2018, when the Syrian government had retaken East Ghouta and territories in southern Syria from opposition groups, the security situation in Syria changed, which led to several developments in the military service.¹⁰³

2.1. Prevalence of recruitment of males under 18 and over 42

2.1.1. Recruitment of males under 18

All the sources interviewed, who had information about the recruitment age, said that they had not received information that indicated that the SAA had been recruiting men under the age of 18.¹⁰⁴ According to Omran Studies, there has neither been forced nor voluntary recruitment of individuals under the age of 18 into the SAA.¹⁰⁵

2.1.2. Recruitment of men over 42

Most of the sources had not received information that the SAA had been recruiting men over the age of 42.¹⁰⁶ According to Jusoor for Studies, there have been no cases of the SAA recruiting males over the age of 42 since 2016, whereas Omran Studies and Suhail Al-Ghazi said that the SAA had not recruited men over 42 since 2018.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrullering, utsettelse og fritak*, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁰² Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰³ Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 6, 27

¹⁰⁴ Gregory Waters: 19; HRW: 48; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 69; Fabrice Balanche: 102; TDA: 119; Watan: 148; Rami: 162; Jusoor for Studies: 189; Omran Studies: 214; Asaad Hanna: 238; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 273; Western diplomat: 303; A humanitarian organisation: 329; SNHR: 350

¹⁰⁵ Omran Studies: 214. Most of the sources stated that pro-government militias, both Russian- and Iranian-backed, do recruit males under 18 years of age on a voluntary basis (Fabrice Balanche: 103; TDA: 120; Rami: 163; Omran Studies: 215; Asaad Hanna: 239; A humanitarian organisation: 330; SNHR: 350). However, SNHR had received information about a person who was forcibly recruited at the age of 16 by his relative, who was commander of a pro-government militia (SNHR: 351). Individuals under 18 join the militias out of economic needs as the militias pay high salaries to their fighters. According to the Syrian activist Rami, young males also join the militias, before they turn 18 in order to avoid conscription by the SAA (Elizabeth Tsurkov: 69; Fabrice Balanche: 103; TDA: 120; Rami: 163; Asaad Hanna: 239; SNHR: 351)

¹⁰⁶ Gregory Waters: 20; HRW: 49; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 70; Fabrice Balanche: 104; TDA: 121; Watan: 148; Rami: 162; Jusoor for Studies: 189; Omran Studies: 216; Asaad Hanna: 238; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 273; Western diplomat: 303; A humanitarian organisation: 329; SNHR: 353. Some sources noted that pro-government militias have been recruiting men over 42 (Gregory Waters: 20; A humanitarian organisation: 329)

¹⁰⁷ Jusoor for Studies: 189; Omran Studies: 216; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 273

Gregory Waters informed the delegation that he had not received information about the SAA forcefully drafting men over the age of 42. He stated, however, that he had heard stories of men over the age of 42 who had been recruited to reserve duty upon return to Syria from Lebanon and Jordan.¹⁰⁸

SNHR had reported cases of persons being called up for military service after reaching the age of 42. The source mentioned the case of Haytham Hassan al-Kan, a teacher in Talbisa city in northern Homs province. He was arrested by Syrian government forces in early 2019 in Homs and was enrolled as a reservist. He was later killed in a battle in Hama province on 13 January 2020. The source was informed about this case by a relative of Haytham and by some residents of Talbisa.¹⁰⁹

2.1.2.1. Administrative orders regarding the military service age for reservists

In January 2019, the SAA issued an administrative order ending the retention and recall of enrolled persons over the age of 42 in the SAA. This included the following categories: non-commissioned officers, draftees (who had not been discharged after serving their conscription period) and enrolled civil reservists who were over the age of 42. However, medical recruits and those who had previously evaded the draft for more than 30 days were excluded from this order.¹¹⁰

On 6 February 2019, another administrative order was issued stipulating the exclusion from reserve military service for men who were born in or before 1981 (38 years or older) and were called up for reserve service (so-called non-enrolled reservists). The administrative circular also included ending the retention and recall of enrolled persons born in or before 1981. This included the following categories: non-commissioned officers, draftees (who were not discharged after serving their conscription period) and enrolled civil reservists. The date set for the implementation of the administrative order was 15 February 2019.¹¹¹

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi and a humanitarian organisation, men over the age of 38 have not been called up for reserve duty since the beginning of February 2019, in accordance with the administrative circular.¹¹² The Syrian opposition news outlet, Orient Net, indicated in an article from November 2019 that the SAA was recruiting men from 18 to 35 years of age in Aleppo to compulsory military service and reserve duty when the army was preparing for an offensive on Idlib.¹¹³

Contrary to the information provided by Suhail Al-Ghazi and the humanitarian organisation, Watan stated that reservists up to the age of 40 were being called up for reserve duty.¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Tsurkov also knew a case of a 40-year-old man who got arrested and conscripted in late 2019.¹¹⁵ According to SNHR and Jusoor

¹⁰⁸ Gregory Waters: 20, 26. When sending the minutes to the source asking for his approval of it, the source was requested to inform the delegation whether these stories were confirmed, and if the source could refer the delegation to written reports on these cases. However, the delegation did not receive an answer to these questions

¹⁰⁹ SNHR: 353

¹¹⁰ Alamanar TV, القيادة العامة للجيش السوري تصدر أمراً إدارياً جديداً, [The General Army Command of SAA issues a new administrative order], January 2019, [url](#)

¹¹¹ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), القيادة العامة للجيش تستبعد الاحتياطيين المدعوين من مواليد 1981 وما قبل من دعوات الاحتياط, [The General Army Command excludes called up reservists born in 1981 and earlier], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

¹¹² Suhail Al-Ghazi: 273; A humanitarian organisation:331

¹¹³ Orient News Net, لماذا أرسلت ميليشيا أسد ضباطاً من الحرس الجمهوري إلى مدينة حلب؟, [Why did the Assad militia send Republican Guard officers to the city of Aleppo?], 18 November 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ Watan: 148

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 71

for Studies, some reservists who had exceeded the age of 42 are still in active reserve duty. SNHR furthermore indicated that it included men up to the age of 48.¹¹⁶

2.2. Prevalence of conscription of only sons

The Syrian Military Service Law stipulates that a person, who is the only male child to his parents, or single parent, can be exempted from military service. This also applies if the parents of the only male child are divorced or if one or both parents have deceased.¹¹⁷ In addition, an only son is to be exempted if he has half-brothers or has become an only male child as a result of the death of one or more of his brothers.¹¹⁸

During the Syrian conflict, minor amendments have been made to the exemption of the only male child.¹¹⁹ Instead of renewing his exemption every two years, the only male child has to renew his exemption every year.¹²⁰ By this amendment, the Syrian authorities want to ensure that the parents of the only son, if they are still alive, have not had another male child during the previous year. Therefore, the person is required to renew his exemption, until his mother reaches the age where she cannot give birth to a child (approximately 50 years).¹²¹

According to consulted sources, the GoS has respected the law and has, in practice, exempted only sons from military service. None of the sources had heard of or registered cases of only sons who had been conscripted.¹²² Omran Studies mentioned that men who were the only male child of their family were still being exempted from military service, even in spite of the current need for manpower in the SAA.¹²³

A western diplomat noted, though, that some of his sources assessed that this exemption has not been respected in former opposition-controlled areas, because individual decision-makers may have motivations for revenge and punishment that may trump the correct application of the Military Service Law. However, the source had not heard of cases where only sons had been conscripted.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, the exemption may not be granted if the person in question does not comply with the application deadlines to prove that he is the only son. This person consequently has to serve in the military.¹²⁵ The Syrian activist Rami mentioned the case of a person who faced difficulties in proving that

¹¹⁶ SNHR: 353; Jusoor for Studies: 189. For more information about the consequences of reaching the age of 42 without having served or paid the exemption fee, see section 3. *Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion*

¹¹⁷ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Defense, الوحييد [Only male child], [url](#)

¹¹⁸ Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrullering, utsettelse og fritak*, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 19

¹¹⁹ Norway, Landinfo, Report, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹²⁰ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Norway, Landinfo, Report, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹²¹ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹²² Elizabeth Tsurkov: 72; Fabrice Balanche: 105; TDA: 123; Watan: 150; Rami: 165; Jusoor for Studies: 190; Omran Studies: 217; Asaad Hanna: 240; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 275; Western diplomat: 304; A humanitarian organisation: 332; SNHR: 354

¹²³ Omran Studies: 217

¹²⁴ Western diplomat: 304

¹²⁵ Watan: 150; Omran Studies: 218; Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p.

he was the only son of his parents as a consequence of his brother's death. He had to go through a complicated process to prove that he was the only son but, in the end, he was exempted.¹²⁶

There are cases of only sons who have joined the SAA voluntarily.¹²⁷ A humanitarian organisation had spoken to only sons from minority groups, including Christians, who joined the SAA voluntarily because they wished to protect their community from what they perceived as the danger of Islamist groups.¹²⁸ Asaad Hanna assumed that some only sons joined the SAA in order to gain power, social status and/or for economic reasons.¹²⁹

2.3. Exemption due to medical conditions

Medical committees in the SAA conduct assessments of people with medical conditions and decide whether a person is to be exempted.¹³⁰

According to TDA, it is not possible to know exactly what medical reasons a person can be exempted for, as it depends on the assessment and determination of the medical committees.¹³¹ Omran Studies indicated that the criteria to assess whether a specific medical condition makes an individual eligible for exemption are changeable and stated that they did not have information about which criteria are currently applied.¹³²

The sources also said that men who had a disability or got disabled while in service, such as losing a limb or an eye (or were over- or underweight), had been exempted from military service or assigned to positions which did not require carrying or using a weapon.¹³³ Elizabeth Tsurkov added that she knew of Syrian soldiers who shot themselves in the leg or arm in order to be exempted. These men were sent back to military service after recovering.¹³⁴

With regards to mental illnesses, Asaad Hanna considered that a person with the condition of insanity would be exempted.¹³⁵ However, Elizabeth Tsurkov stated that she knew people inside Syria who had serious mental disorders, but they were still serving. She mentioned that this included people who were deeply traumatised, e.g. people with drinking problems, PTSD, depression and/or anxiety.¹³⁶

Few sources also mentioned that some persons paid bribes to be exempted for medical conditions.¹³⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov and Jusoor for Studies stated that a person, who should be exempted due to his serious medical condition, may even have to pay a bribe to be exempted.¹³⁸ According to Asaad Hanna, a person who is given administrative work as a substitute for regular military service because of his inability to fight

¹²⁶ Rami: 165

¹²⁷ Asaad Hanna: 241; A humanitarian organisation:333

¹²⁸ A humanitarian organisation:333

¹²⁹ Asaad Hanna: 241

¹³⁰ Asaad Hanna: 242; Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrullering, utsettelse og fritak*, 14 November 2017, [url](#), pp. 22-23; Sweden, Lifos Migrationsverket, *Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst* (version 3.0), 30 May 2017, [url](#), p. 39

¹³¹ TDA: 124

¹³² Omran Studies: 219

¹³³ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 73; TDA: 124-125; Jusoor for Studies: 191; Omran Studies: 219; Asaad Hanna: 243; Suhail: 276

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 73

¹³⁵ Asaad Hanna: 243

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 74

¹³⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 73; Jusoor for Studies: 191; Asaad Hanna: 243

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 73; Jusoor for Studies: 191

can sometimes pay a bribe to be allowed to stay at home, while the bribed authority makes it look as if the person is doing his military service in an office.¹³⁹

Finally, the sources spoke of men who had been discharged because they had been disabled during the conflict.¹⁴⁰

2.4. The exemption fee

2.4.1. The exemption fee rules

The Syrian Military Service Law permits Syrian men of military service age (18-42), including registered Palestinians from Syria, to pay a fee (البدل النقدي) to be exempted from compulsory military service and not be called up again. However, this option only applies for people residing abroad.¹⁴¹ On the website of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, the rules and conditions for paying the exemption fee are outlined in detail. It stipulates that men who have been residing outside Syria in an Arab as well as in a non-Arab country for no less than four consecutive years can pay an amount of 8,000 USD to be exempted from military service. The person in question has to pay the fee within a deadline of three months after being called up for service. The deadline can be extended by two more days if the conscript has been residing outside Syria for up to five years. But in this case, the person will have to pay the exemption fee plus an additional fee of 25,000 SYP (about 50 USD). In order to be exempted, the conscript who has lived abroad for more than five years and who has not paid the exemption fee within the deadline, will have to pay 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) for every year that he has exceeded the age of 18 plus the 8,000 USD exemption fee.¹⁴²

In addition, a male in the military service age, who was born outside Syria, in an Arab or non-Arab country, and has been residing there until he turned 18 can pay an exemption fee of 2,500 USD, until he has turned 25. It should be noted that a visit of up to three months to Syria does not count as a disruption of a person's residence in the foreign country. For every year that a person exceeds the age of 18 without enlisting for, or postponing his military service or paying the exemption fee, he will have to pay 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) plus the exemption fee. A person who has exceeded the age of 25 will have to pay 8,000 USD to be exempted from military service.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Asaad Hanna: 243

¹⁴⁰ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 268; Asaad Hanna: 236; A humanitarian organisation:326; Omran Studies: 210

¹⁴¹ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 27-28

¹⁴² Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#)

¹⁴³ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#)

Figur 1: The exemption fee rules

	Syrian men who have lived abroad for no less than four continuous years.	Syrian men under 25 years of age, born in an Arab or non-Arab country with continuous residency in a foreign country until the age of 18.
Exemption fee to be payed:	8,000 USD.	2,500 USD
Deadlines for paying the exemption fee:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The deadline for paying the exemption fee is three months after being called up for conscription. This deadline can be extended by two more days if <u>the conscripted person has been residing outside Syria for up to five years.</u> In this case, the person will have to pay a fine of 25,000 SYP (about 50 USD) for exceeding the deadline on top of the 8,000 USD exemption fee. A person who has lived abroad for more than five years and who failed to pay the exemption within the deadline has to pay a fine of 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) for every year that he failed to enlist since the age of 18. This fine is to be paid on top of the 8,000 USD exemption fee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For every year that a person exceeds the age of 18 without enlisting for military service or paying the exemption fee, the individual will have to pay 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) on top of the exemption fee. A person who has exceeded the age of 25 will have to pay 8,000 USD to be exempted from military service.

Men who left Syria legally, as well as those who left illegally, can be exempted from military service by paying the 8,000 USD exemption fee, according to both the Chief of Immigration and Passports Department, General Najji Numeir, whom DIS interviewed in November 2018, and the Director of the Consular Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Mawla al-Nakri, who was interviewed by the local Syrian pro-government newspaper *Economy2Day* in December 2018.¹⁴⁴

The consulted sources stated that there was no law stipulating that a reservist was eligible for paying a fee to be exempted.¹⁴⁵ According to SNHR, a reservist can avoid military service by bribing the officer in charge who will then register that the reservist is serving.¹⁴⁶

2.4.2. The procedure and required documents

Besides paying the exemption fee by bank transfer, check or cash, a person needs to go through an administrative procedure which includes providing documents and filling in forms in order to receive an

¹⁴⁴ Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p. 29; *Economy2Day*, كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع النبدل [Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee], 15 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ Rami: 174; Jusoor for Studies: 196; Omran Studies: 223; Asaad Hanna: 281; SNHR: 357. According to SNHR, a reservist can avoid military service by bribing the officer in charge who will then register that the reservist is serving (SNHR: 357).

¹⁴⁶ SNHR: 357

official document which states that he is exempted from military service.¹⁴⁷ According to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, this process can be completed by the conscript at a Syrian embassy or consulate in the foreign country of residence. The documents required in order to be permitted to pay the exemption fee are:

- a Residence Document (i.e. a document proving one's legal residence in the foreign country in question),
- a written application to an authority in the General Directorate for Recruitment or a local military division,¹⁴⁸
- the military book or a copy of the military book,
- an Entry and Exit Statement, stating the date the applicant exited Syria, and
- a copy of either the Syrian Passport, Syrian ID-card or the Syrian Civil Registry Statement.¹⁴⁹

The conscript, one of his family members or his legal representative is required to send a written application in which he expresses his wish to pay the exemption fee to the General Directorate for Recruitment or to the recruitment division to which the applicant is to report.¹⁵⁰

The Residence Document can be obtained from a Syrian representation or from the local authorities in the country of residence. The document should include the start date of the residence (and the end date of residence if feasible) and the dates of the periods that the conscript has not been living in the current country of residence. Individuals that have resided in more than one country have to provide a proof of their residence in each country. In countries with no diplomatic representation of the Syrian Arab Republic, the individual will have to provide a Residence Document issued by the local authorities or provide other documents that prove the residence in the foreign country, such as a copy of the residency permit or a copy of a work contract.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Norway, Landinfo, Report, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁴⁸ The Syrian Embassies and Consulates have the forms that are required to be filled in (Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#)). Syrians in Denmark are referred to book an appointment with the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm in order to complete the exemption fee process. The forms are also available on the website of the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *Syrian Citizens Affairs*, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#). On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs it is stated that a copy of the Syrian Civil Registry Statement is required. However, in the "Citizen's Guidelines for Paying the Exemption Fee" (translated from Arabic) that was issued in the beginning of 2020, it is stated that a copy of a person's Syrian passport or his ID-card can be handed in instead of a copy of the Syrian Civil Registry Statement (Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, دليل المواطن لدفع البديل النقدي [Citizen's Guidelines for Paying the Exemption Fee], [url](#))

¹⁵⁰ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#)

¹⁵¹ Men born outside of Syria who want to pay the exemption fee also have to provide certified copies of the primary and secondary school certificates. Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#)

Additionally, applicants for the exemption fee have to hand in their military book or a copy of it. Persons, who do not have a military book, will have to fill out an additional form in order to have a military book issued.¹⁵²

Moreover, the applicant needs to provide an Entry and Exit Statement which includes the dates of his exit of Syria. This statement is issued by the Department of Immigration and Passports or one of its branches.¹⁵³

The applicant has to hand in a copy of either his Syrian passport, Syrian ID-card or the Syrian Civil Registry Statement.¹⁵⁴

After the applicant submits the required documents, it will take the Syrian authorities up to 34 working days to complete the casework of an application.¹⁵⁵

2.4.3. Implementation of the exemption fee procedure by the Syrian authorities

According to news reports and sources interviewed for this report, the Syrian government is in need of foreign currency, which is why it has eased the process of paying the exemption fee.¹⁵⁶

Jusoor for Studies informed the delegation that the actual implementation of the 8,000 USD exemption fee procedure is compatible with the formal procedure described above.¹⁵⁷

The sources stated that the requirements of the exemption fee, including residence of at least four consecutive years in a foreign country and a fee of 8,000 USD, are being implemented.¹⁵⁸ According to the Syrian activist Rami, a person who has stayed less than four years outside Syria will not be allowed to pay the exemption fee and be exempted. He would thus be drafted upon return.¹⁵⁹ Omran Studies was not aware of any cases in which individuals, who had stayed abroad for less than four years, had succeeded in paying the exemption fee and got exempted. But the source did not rule out the possibility that this could happen if a high bribe was paid to the Syrian authorities.¹⁶⁰

Jusoor for Studies emphasised that there was no law stipulating that men residing in Syria can pay a fee to be exempted. However, many men currently residing in Syria are paying the exemption fee through an illegal procedure where the residence information of the applicant is manipulated in such a way that the

¹⁵² Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, دليل المواطن لدفع البديل النقدي [Citizen's Guidelines for Paying the Exemption Fee], [url](#)

¹⁵³ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البديل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#); Syrian Arab Republic, The Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *Syrian Citizens Affairs*, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, دليل المواطن لدفع البديل النقدي [Guidelines for paying the Exemption Fee], [url](#)

¹⁵⁶ TDA: 127; Jusoor for Studies:193; SNHR: 356; Almodan, إلغاء الموافقات الأمنية للوكالات الخارجية, [Cancellation of security approvals for foreign agencies], 22 October 2018, [url](#); Neda Syria, النظام السوري ينشر تفاصيل جديدة عن بدل الخدمة العسكرية [Syrian regime publishes new details on military service exemption fee], 5 May 2019, [url](#); Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, *Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁵⁷ Jusoor for Studies: 194. Jusoor for Studies stated that the exemption from military service will be marked in a separate document and not in the military book. However, according to Omran Studies, the proof that a person has paid the exemption fee is two stamps in his military book (Omran Studies: 221)

¹⁵⁸ Rami: 171; TDA: 128; Omran Studies: 220, 222; Asaad Hanna: 244

¹⁵⁹ Rami: 172

¹⁶⁰ Omran Studies: 222

individual's place of residence is changed to be a location outside Syria. By doing this, the main condition for paying the exemption fee officially appears to be met.¹⁶¹

According to the Syrian activist, Rami, males who have not postponed their military service every year at a Syrian diplomatic representation, as otherwise required by Syrian Military Law, are also allowed to make use of the exemption fee rule if they have resided at least four consecutive years outside Syria. It is thus in practice not among the requirements for paying the exemption fee that a person has to postpone his service every year.¹⁶² The source knew of men who did not postpone their military service every year at a Syrian representation abroad and were, nevertheless allowed to pay the exemption fee and were exempted.¹⁶³ However, in addition to the 8,000 USD fee, additional fines for not postponing the military service every year are to be paid along with the exemption fee.¹⁶⁴

2.4.3.1. Sorting out one's affairs

Al-Ghazi advised that as part of the procedure to pay the exemption fee, a person had to apply to sort out his affairs [*taswiyat al-wada'*] with the Syrian authorities. This application entails that the authorities will make an inquiry into whether the person has any outstanding issues with the GoS.¹⁶⁵ According to Asaad Hanna, the applicant will have to go through a security check in the process of sorting out his possible outstanding issues with the GoS, which takes place at a Syrian embassy or consulate.¹⁶⁶

According to the Director of the Consular Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Mawla al-Nakri, who was interviewed by the local Syrian pro-government newspaper *Economy2Day* in December 2018, those who have exited Syria illegally need to sort out their affairs before they can be exempted.¹⁶⁷ Al-Nakri's statement is in accordance with an announcement on the website of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, according to which, persons who have exited illegally, including those who need to sort out their military situation, are required to apply for sorting out their affairs at the Syrian embassy in the country of residence or at the nearest Syrian embassy.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, the Syrian activist Rami said that an illegal stay abroad is not counted as an obstacle by the GoS for people wanting to pay the exemption fee.¹⁶⁹

Moreover, men who want to pay the exemption fee, but who are wanted by the GoS for security-related affairs, will have to apply sorting out their affairs at a Syrian diplomatic representation if they want to be exempted by paying the exemption fee.¹⁷⁰ However, as Al-Ghazi explained, in most cases, the authorities will approve to sort out the persons outstanding affairs and delete the person's name from wanted lists if

¹⁶¹ Jusoor for Studies: 195

¹⁶² Rami: 172- 173

¹⁶³ Rami: 173

¹⁶⁴ TDA: 128; SNHR: 356

¹⁶⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 280

¹⁶⁶ Asaad Hanna: 244

¹⁶⁷ Economy2Day, [كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البدل](#), [Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee], 15 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, [تسوية وضع](#) [Sorting out one's issues] [url](#). For information on security approvals and sorting out one's issues, see Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 19-20; EASO, *Exercise of authority in recaptured areas*, January 2020, [url](#), pp. 16-18

¹⁶⁹ Rami: 171

¹⁷⁰ TDA: 130; Rami: 169

the name is on any of these lists.¹⁷¹ Asaad Hanna knew of several cases where people who were in opposition to the GoS were allowed to pay the exemption fee and had new passports issued.¹⁷²

The Syrian activist Rami knew many Syrian NGO workers, who had fled to Lebanon, and who paid the exemption fee and returned to Syria. They paid the fee at the Syrian embassy in Lebanon and were exempted. They did not pay additional fees or bribes, and they are now working inside Syria. The source added that if a person was wanted by the authorities for activism against the GoS, he would sometimes have to pay a bribe in order to sort out his affairs and be allowed to pay the exemption fee to be exempted from military service. However, bribes cannot be used if a person is wanted for charges of terrorism.¹⁷³ Suhail Al-Ghazi confirmed that people wanted for fighting against the GoS would hardly get their names cleared.¹⁷⁴

Additionally, the GoS in practice allows draft evaders, who have resided abroad for at least four consecutive years, to make use of the law and pay the exemption fee without further consequences.¹⁷⁵ Their names will be removed from lists of wanted people for military service when the authorities approve that the person pays the exemption fee.¹⁷⁶ However, TDA assessed that draft evaders living in Western countries as asylum seekers would most likely not make use of this law, as they would fear that their showing up at a Syrian representation could be considered as proof that they were not persecuted by the GoS. They would thus fear losing their refugee status if they made contact with Syrian authorities.¹⁷⁷

2.4.4. Extent of use of the exemption fee option

In a statement to the pro-government news source *Alwatan* in August 2019, a judicial source said that there had been an increase in the number of people who had paid the exemption fee since the end of 2018.¹⁷⁸ In the article published on 15 December 2018 in the pro-government news website, *Economy2Day*, the Director of the Consular Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Mawla al-Nakri, stated that the number of people who wanted to pay the exemption fee had increased by 50 % within the previous two months.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, the independent Syrian news source, *Enabbaladi*, reported in September 2019 that the number of young Syrian men making appointments with the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul to pay the exemption fee had increased dramatically in the last period.¹⁸⁰

Furthermore, Mawla al-Nakri stated in *Economy2Day* that the number of persons, who had applied to sort out their affairs because of their illegal exit from Syria in order to pay the exemption fee, had increased tenfold by the end of 2018. According to another official in the Department of Immigration and Passports, the department was issuing 50 Entry and Exit Statements each day for persons, who requested the statements in order to pay the exemption fee.¹⁸¹

¹⁷¹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 280

¹⁷² Asaad Hanna: 245, 246. The source added that some of the persons he knew did not want to return to Syria but paid the exemption fee solely to acquire passports that are valid for six years.

¹⁷³ Rami: 170

¹⁷⁴ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 280

¹⁷⁵ TDA: 129; Rami: 172

¹⁷⁶ Jusoor for Studies:192, 194

¹⁷⁷ TDA: 129

¹⁷⁸ *Alwatan*, زيادة في إصدار جوازات السفر من قبل المغتربين, [An increase in the issuance of passports by expatriates], 19 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹ *Economy2Day*, كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البدل, [Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee], 15 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁰ *Enabbaladi*, Military Service Exemption Fee: Expensive Return Ticket To Homeland, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

¹⁸¹ *Economy2Day*, كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البدل, [Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee], 15 December 2018, [url](#)

2.4.5. Respect of the exemption fee rules by the Syrian authorities

In a fact-finding mission (FFM) report by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2018 and a FFM report published by DIS and Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in 2019, sources said that males who had paid the exemption fee did not face any problem with the Syrian government upon return and were not called up for military service later on.¹⁸²

According to the sources interviewed by the delegation, the Syrian authorities do respect the exemption fee rules. The sources knew/had heard of people who had paid the exemption fee and had not faced any problem after having returned to Syria.¹⁸³ The humanitarian organisation knew many persons who had paid the exemption fee. Some of them were currently residing in Syria, while others travelled to Syria regularly without facing any difficulty with regards to military service.¹⁸⁴ Some of the men that Omran Studies knew of, who had paid the exemption fee, were able to exit Syria after a visit without experiencing any obstacle.¹⁸⁵ The Syrian activist Rami knew of many Syrian NGO workers who had fled to Lebanon, and who had paid the exemption fee and returned to Syria. They paid the fee at the Syrian embassy in Lebanon and were exempted.¹⁸⁶

Some sources said that they had not heard of cases of people being taken to military service upon return to Syria despite having paid the exemption fee.¹⁸⁷ However, Asaad Hanna had heard about two men who returned from Lebanon to Syria and were arrested at the border and conscripted by the SAA, in spite of having paid the exemption fee. They had paid the exemption fee at an embassy abroad and one month later, they went to Syria. These two cases took place within the last year (i.e. 2019-2020). The source did not know the particulars of these two cases, including the reason for their arrest.¹⁸⁸ According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, it is better for a person who pays the exemption fee to wait at least two months before returning to Syria to ensure that the military police has enough time to remove his name from wanted lists for military service or wanted lists for other outstanding issues. Otherwise, the person may risk facing problems upon return as the authorities may not have had sufficient time to clear his name from the wanted lists.¹⁸⁹

Fabrice Balanche stated that the law about the exemption fee is generally respected by the GoS. However, as the corruption in Syria may be prevalent among the intelligence service officers at Damascus Airport and at other official border crossings, an officer in charge may try to get a bribe from the person who has paid the exemption upon his return. The officer may think that this person has a lot of money since he was able

¹⁸² DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p.28; Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, *Syria: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁸³ Fabrice Balanche: 108; TDA: 126; Rami: 168; Jusoor for Studies: 192; Omran Studies: 220; Asaad Hanna: 245, 246; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 277; A humanitarian organisation: 334-335; SNHR: 355

¹⁸⁴ A humanitarian organisation: 335

¹⁸⁵ Omran Studies: 220

¹⁸⁶ Rami: 168

¹⁸⁷ TDA: 126; Rami: 168; Jusoor for Studies: 192; Omran Studies: 220; A humanitarian organisation: 334

¹⁸⁸ Asaad Hanna: 247

¹⁸⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 279. According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, before 2018, persons who wanted to pay the exemption fee would have the option of either going to Syria and pay the fee or having the fee paid by a family member or a middleman on one's behalf. It was then not possible to pay it at a Syrian Diplomatic representation abroad. The source knew of three cases from that time where young Syrian men, who wanted to be exempted, were deceived by some middlemen who took their money and forged their exemption fee documents. Two of these conscripts were taken to military service upon return to Syria. However, one of them managed to pay the exemption fee once more and thus avoided military service (Suhail Al-Ghazi: 278)

to pay the exemption fee. The officer could thus use any excuse to extort such person for money, for instance, by referring to something missing in the exemption documents or in the registration of this person in the database of the intelligence service. The source mentioned one case in which a Syrian man had paid the exemption fee, but was nevertheless detained when he arrived at Damascus Airport in summer 2019. The intelligence service assumed that his documents were missing some details and wanted to clarify the issue while he was detained. He was in detention for 24 hours until he paid a bribe and was released.¹⁹⁰

2.5. Possibility of visiting Syria for Syrian expatriates of military service age

2.5.1. Description of the procedure

Expatriates, including Syrian citizens and Palestinians from Syria of military service age, who have not completed their military service and have not postponed it each year after turning 18, are entitled to apply for a 90 days visit to Syria once a year. An expatriate whose application is approved, will receive a document which he can use as a proof of approval to reside in Syria for a period of 90 days without being taken to military service. The document is valid from the date that he enters Syria through a Syrian airport or another official border crossing. The individual does not need an approval from the military division in his area of origin to leave Syria again.¹⁹¹

In order to apply for a visit, an expatriate has to fill in a form and submit it to the Syrian diplomatic representation in his country of residence along with other documents, including:

- a copy of his Syrian ID-card,
- (or a copy of his Family Registry Statement),
- a copy of his Syrian passport and residence permit in the foreign country,
- (or a copy of his foreign passport if the expatriate has citizenship in that country).¹⁹²

Expatriates who have completed their compulsory military service and have been called up for reserve duty on the day that they left Syria or afterwards, can apply to postpone their reserve service and visit Syria for up to 90 days once a year.¹⁹³

Persons who have left Syria illegally or by using fake passports will have to sort out their affairs before applying to postpone their reserve duty. Along with a completed application form, the expatriate has to submit the following documents:

- an Entry and Exit Statement,

¹⁹⁰ Fabrice Balanche: 108

¹⁹¹ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Consulate in Manama, Bahrain, تعليمات التقديم بطلب تسهيل زيارة إلى القطر للمواطنين المتخلفين عن خدمة العلم, *[Instructions to apply for a visit to the country for citizens who failed to report for enlistment]*, [url](#); Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, زيارة المغترب *[Visit of the Expatriate]*, [url](#). It should be noted that some Syrian embassies and consulates inform in more details about the procedure of the application for visiting Syria.

¹⁹² Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Consulate in Manama, Bahrain, تعليمات التقديم بطلب تسهيل زيارة إلى القطر للمواطنين المتخلفين عن خدمة العلم, *[Instructions to apply for a visit to the country for citizens who failed to report for enlistment]*, [url](#); Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, زيارة المغترب *[Visit of the Expatriate]*, [url](#).

¹⁹³ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Consulate in Manama, Bahrain, تعليمات التقديم بطلب تسهيل زيارة إلى القطر للمواطنين المتخلفين عن خدمة العلم, *[Instructions to apply for a visit to the country for citizens who failed to report for enlistment]*, [url](#); Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, زيارة المغترب *[Visit of the Expatriate]*, [url](#)

- the military book or a copy of it, if it is in his possession, and
- a Syrian passport or Syrian ID-card or Syrian Civil Registry Statement.

If the application is approved, the expatriate will receive a document proving his postponement of reserve duty.¹⁹⁴

2.5.2. Implementation of approval to visit Syria

In an article on the economic news website, Eqtsad, issued on 31 October 2019, the procedure and implementation of “Visit to the Country” is elaborated. According to the article, applications to visit Syria for Syrian citizens and Palestinians from Syria of military service age are approved if applicants are not wanted by the GoS for any crime. The article further mentions cases of people who got such approvals and went to Syria, including cases of Syrian men from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon who succeeded in returning back to Syria and stayed for a maximum of 90 days without being conscripted. However, a Syrian man from Lebanon was conscripted at the border despite having an approval to visit the country.¹⁹⁵

Jusoor for Studies told the delegation that he knew many men in different ages who had made use of the above-mentioned option. They applied for the visit at a Syrian diplomatic representation and went back to visit their families for a period of time. They did not experience any issues with regard to military service. To the source’s knowledge, however, this option is not available for deserters and draft evaders.¹⁹⁶ According to Omran Studies, the rule that gives men in the military service age the opportunity to visit Syria for a period of three months without being conscripted, is being implemented by the GoS.¹⁹⁷

The Syrian activist Rami, however, found it dangerous to return to Syria on the basis of a decree allowing men in the military service age to pay a three months visit to Syria.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, دليل المواطن لاستبعاد المكلف بالاحتياط [Citizen’s guidelines for being excluded from reserve], [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ Eqtsad, زيارة القطر " للشباب السوريين.. تجارب، وتفصيل عن التكاليف والتبويضات المطلوبة, 31 October 2019, [url](#). Eqtsad is the economic news website of the anti-government news outlet Zaman al-Wasl (Facebook, Eqtsad, [url](#))

¹⁹⁶ Jusoor for Studies: 197

¹⁹⁷ Nawar: 224

¹⁹⁸ Rami: 175

3. Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, the GoS' main issue with regards to the draft was to provide manpower in order to face armed rebel groups. The number of men who avoided the compulsory and reserve military service increased significantly. A large number of men of military age either fled the country, joined the armed opposition or went into hiding.¹⁹⁹ According to the Syrian Military Law, men who evade or desert military service face financial and legal repercussions.²⁰⁰ These will be addressed in the following sections.

3.1. Possible consequences of draft evasion

When draft evaders are caught by the Syrian authorities, they are sent directly to military service or to military training camps.²⁰¹

The Syrian activist Rami mentioned that the GoS had become more lenient at the current stage in the conflict and would not put a draft evader in prison, unless he was also wanted for other offences than solely for his draft evasion.²⁰² Likewise, a western diplomat assessed that a draft evader caught by the authorities would likely be conscripted rather than imprisoned, or may face a combination of both. This is due to the SAA's current need for manpower which is likely to outweigh the GoS' interest in imprisoning draft evaders in an already overcrowded Syrian prison system.²⁰³

Al-Ghazi advised that an evader from a pro-government area would unlikely be imprisoned. Instead, the person will be sent directly to military service.²⁰⁴ According to TDA, this is a change from the previous practice. Previously, a draft evader would be sentenced to nine months' imprisonment if caught inside Syria, and if a draft evader had fled abroad, he would be sentenced to two years of imprisonment upon return.²⁰⁵

However, there were sources who mentioned that draft evaders, who were caught, would risk being detained or imprisoned by the Syrian authorities before being conscripted.²⁰⁶

According to SNHR and a humanitarian organisation, draft evaders would be imprisoned for a few days (for evading) and then sent to military service, unless the person is wanted by the SAA for other offences.²⁰⁷ Al-Ghazi stated that consequence for draft evasion was up to three months imprisonment.²⁰⁸ Jusoor for Studies knew of cases in which draft evaders had been arrested upon returning to Syria from Lebanon.²⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch stated that draft evaders caught by the Syrian authorities in 2019 were either

¹⁹⁹ Sweden, Migrationsverket and Finland, FIS, *SYRIA: MILITARY SERVICE, NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES, ARMED GROUPS SUPPORTING SYRIAN REGIME AND ARMED OPPOSITION*, 23 August 2016, [url](#), p. 5., In 2014 to 2015 the number of personnel was estimated to have been reduced by approximately 50 percent

²⁰⁰ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#); Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#)

²⁰¹ Rami: 176; TDA: 131; Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 39; Western diplomat: 308

²⁰² Rami: 176

²⁰³ Western diplomat: 308

²⁰⁴ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 283

²⁰⁵ TDA: 131

²⁰⁶ HRW: 50; Jusoor for Studies: 199; SNHR: 358; A humanitarian organisation: 336; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 283

²⁰⁷ SNHR: 358; A humanitarian organisation: 336

²⁰⁸ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 283

²⁰⁹ Jusoor for Studies: 199

detained or had to pay a fine. Detained draft evaders were subsequently conscripted into military service and sent to the frontlines. Human Rights Watch described a case in which a draft evader was caught by GoS and the draft evader's parents were forced to pay the fine. Once the fine was paid, the person was conscripted and sent to the frontlines in Idlib province.²¹⁰

However, according to Fabrice Balanche, the consequences of draft evasion for the individual evader remain unclear as very large numbers of Syrians have evaded their military service, and it would thus be impossible for the Syrian authorities to imprison all men that have evaded the draft during the conflict in Syria.²¹¹

Elizabeth Tsurkov, Gregory Waters and Omran Studies also stated that arrested draft evaders would subsequently be sent to the frontlines to fight for the SAA or sent on patrols around ISIS-controlled areas in eastern Syria.²¹²

However, it has been possible for some draft evaders, who were caught by the GoS, to avoid being sent to the frontlines by paying bribes and using their connections within the SAA and the GoS due to widespread corruption among Syrian authorities.²¹³ Asaad Hanna and Omran Studies outlined that in such cases, draft evaders were able to serve in non-frontline units or to simply be staying in their homes whilst remaining officially enlisted as active duty soldiers.²¹⁴ Omran Studies described specific cases in Damascus in which draft evaders were able to stay in their homes whilst technically being enlisted as active duty soldiers.²¹⁵

With regards to reserve duty evaders, Omran Studies knew of cases in which reservists had evaded active military service in the SAA in 2016 by fleeing Syria. Upon their return to GoS-controlled areas in Syria, they were told by the authorities not to re-join the military until called up by the SAA.²¹⁶

Al-Tamimi said that draft evaders are currently put on wanted lists.²¹⁷ Some men are therefore staying in their homes to avoid being conscripted at checkpoints.²¹⁸ Fabrice Balanche explained that in some cases, the officer in charge may even arrest men who have documents postponing their military service in order to receive a bribe. He also mentioned a case in which a man was called up for reserve duty but paid approximately 2,000 USD in bribes to have his reserve duty postponed for a couple of months, which allowed him to flee Syria and avoid military service.²¹⁹

3.1.1. Amendment of Military Service Law regarding evaders over the age of 42

In December 2019, Article 97 of the Syrian Military Service Law was amended stipulating that men who have reached the age of 42 without having completed their military service are to pay an exemption fee of 8,000 USD within three months after turning 42. In case a person does not pay the fee, an executive seizure of his movable and immovable assets will be carried out by the GoS. The authorities will thus have the right

²¹⁰ HRW: 50

²¹¹ Fabrice Balanche: 109

²¹² Gregory Waters: 24; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 76; Omran Studies: 225

²¹³ Gregory Waters: 24; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 76; Omran Studies: 225; Asaad Hanna: 248

²¹⁴ Omran Studies: 225; Asaad Hanna: 248

²¹⁵ Omran Studies: 225; According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, it is now possible for draft evaders to seek hospital treatment, because the authorities have stated that they will not arrest draft evaders in hospitals. Previously, draft evaders did not dare go to state institutions or hospitals for fear of being revealed and arrested (Suhail Al-Ghazi: 282)

²¹⁶ Omran Studies: 226

²¹⁷ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 39

²¹⁸ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 37; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 66; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 272

²¹⁹ Fabrice Balanche: 98-99

to confiscate and sell any property owned by the person without warning.²²⁰ In case the person's assets are insufficient, the assets of his wife/wives and children will also be confiscated.²²¹ TDA assessed that this law would entail that men who were about to turn 42 and who did not have money enough to pay the exemption fee would prefer to join the SAA instead of losing their properties. However, the source did not know of cases of men who had reached the age of 42 and joined the military in order to avoid the confiscation of their properties.²²²

3.2. Possible consequences of desertion and defection

Deserters have been imprisoned for their desertion.²²³ Suhail Al-Ghazi mentioned that the consequences of desertion depends on the reason for the desertion. The punishment ranges from a few years of imprisonment to execution.²²⁴ Fabrice Balanche said that deserters, who have been arrested by the GoS, are tried before a military court and given a short sentence because the SAA needs manpower at the frontlines.²²⁵

SNHR mentioned that a deserter would usually be imprisoned at one of the branches of the Syrian intelligence services. The deserter could risk torture or being forcefully disappeared whilst in custody of the intelligence services.²²⁶ The intelligence branch that is detaining the deserter may decide to transfer him to a military court where he will be sentenced based on the offenses he is accused of.²²⁷

A western diplomat mentioned that the consequences for desertion remained unchanged in Syrian Military Law. The diplomat assumed, however, that the GoS would not only punish deserters for the desertion act as required by law but also make use of other laws to pursue deserters, such as the anti-terrorism laws of 2012.²²⁸

A humanitarian organisation and Jusoor for Studies said that deserters could avoid prison and punishment if they had sorted out their affairs with the GoS.²²⁹ A precondition for sorting out one's affairs with the Syrian authorities would be for the deserter to reenlist in the SAA.²³⁰ However, the humanitarian organisation noted that deserters, who have committed crimes such as killings, rape, etc. would not be able

²²⁰ Enabbaladi, إجراءات جديدة لجني الأموال من المتخلفين عن الخدمة العسكرية [New procedures for making money from those who have dodged military service], 22 December 2019, [url](#). The former amendment stipulated that men who do not pay the fee within the specified period will be imprisoned for a year and obliged to pay an additional 200 USD for every year exceeding the deadline provided that the fees paid do not exceed 2,000 USD in total. In addition, those who have exceeded the military service age and have not paid 8,000 USD will have their property confiscated **temporarily** until they have paid the outstanding fee (Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p. 28)

²²¹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 284; Carnegie Middle East Center, Changes to Syria's conscription law will prevent the repairing of relations between the armed forces and civilians, 20 February 2020, [url](#)

²²² TDA: 122

²²³ Fabrice Balanche: 100; Jusoor for Studies:198; Al-Ghazi 282; Western diplomat: 307, 309; SNHR: 359

²²⁴ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 282

²²⁵ Fabrice Balanche: 110

²²⁶ As defined by the UN, enforced disappearance is considered to be "the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law" (UNOHCHR, International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 20 December 2006, [url](#))

²²⁷ SNHR: 359

²²⁸ Western diplomat: 307; 309

²²⁹ A humanitarian organisation: 337; Jusoor for Studies: 198

²³⁰ A humanitarian organisation: 337; Please see EASO, Exercise of authority in recaptured areas, January 2020, [url](#), pp.16-18, for an overview of the process of 'Sorting out of affairs' (taswiyat al-wada) with the Syrian authorities

to sort out their affairs with the GoS and avoid punishment. Instead, they would be tried in court and punished for their crimes.²³¹

Jusoor for Studies mentioned a few cases in which deserters had been able to sort out their affairs with the GoS and return to Syria without being punished for their desertion.²³² Aymenn Al-Tamimi mentioned that deserters were sent directly to military service if caught by Syrian authorities.²³³

3.2.1. Prevalence of execution of deserters and defectors

A number of consulted sources reported that deserters no longer risked being executed for having deserted from the SAA.²³⁴ These sources explained that deserters were killed or executed previously during the war in Syria, but that the GoS has changed its practices within the last few years.²³⁵ TDA reported that some deserting officers had been able to sort out their affairs with the GoS and return to their positions in the military.²³⁶

However, Elizabeth Tsurkov and Jusoor for Studies assessed that deserters would still risk being killed or executed if they were arrested by the Syrian authorities.²³⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov mentioned cases in which men had been executed while trying to desert, including during the latest offensive in Idlib in 2020.²³⁸ TDA reported that some deserters were executed for treason like in the case of Safwan Bakour.²³⁹ The Syrian Observer reported that Safwan Bakour was executed in spite of having sorted out his affairs with the GoS.²⁴⁰

With regards to defectors, Watan referred to the cases of 15 persons who were sentenced to death by the military court in Damascus on 25 July 2019, including defectors, on charges of treason.²⁴¹ These cases were reported by the Syrian Observer and Orient News in August 2019.²⁴²

According to Elizabeth Tsurkov, defectors are particularly vulnerable to arrest even if they have settled their status with the Syrian authorities. Elizabeth highlighted cases from Daraa, in which 15 defectors were arrested and tortured to death by the Syrian authorities in spite of having sorted out their affairs with the Syrian authorities.²⁴³ The western diplomat considered that defectors were generally subject to arrest, punishment and they risked being killed.²⁴⁴

²³¹ A humanitarian organisation: 337

²³² Jusoor for Studies:198

²³³ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 39

²³⁴ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 39; TDA: 132; Rami: 177, 178; Asaad Hanna: 249

²³⁵ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 39; TDA: 132; Rami: 177

²³⁶ TDA: 132

²³⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 77; Jusoor for Studies:198

²³⁸ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 77, 79

²³⁹ TDA: 132

²⁴⁰ The Syrian Observer, *Hezbollah Arrests Them, and the Regime Executes Them*, 2 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁴¹ Watan: 151

²⁴² The Syrian Observer, *Hezbollah Arrests Them, and the Regime Executes Them*, 2 August 2019, [url](#); Orient News Net, *Hezbollah arrests Syrians and Assad regime executes them*, 02 August 2019, [url](#). Both sources based their information on reporting done by the Lebanese news site Al-Modon

²⁴³ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 78; Elisabeth Tsurkov @Elizrael, *Twitter post*, 31 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁴ Western diplomat: 310

3.3 Implementation of amnesties regarding draft evaders and deserters

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, many Syrian men, including both conscripts and reservists, have avoided or refused fighting in the SAA by deserting or evading. According to Syrian law, evaders and deserters can be charged with a criminal offence and punished. Several amnesties have been issued by the Syrian government in the previous few years, latest in 2019,²⁴⁵ granting amnesty for all Syrian men, inside and outside of Syria, who have evaded military service or have deserted the army, provided that they report for duty within four months (if they reside inside Syria) and six months (if they reside abroad). The decree does not eliminate their obligation to perform compulsory military service, however, and the pardoned evaders and deserters thus still have to conduct their military service.²⁴⁶

The consulted sources stated that little to no information was available on the implementation and scope of the general amnesties issued by the GoS for draft evaders and deserters.²⁴⁷

According to a western diplomat, it is difficult to find information about the amnesties issued by the GoS. Firstly, because the lack of UN's access or any other independent and impartial organisation in Syria make information collection and reliable monitoring very difficult. Secondly, these amnesties have not led to the return of a large number of former draft evaders and deserters, which makes it difficult to collect information from draft evaders and deserters themselves. According to the western diplomat, most potential returnees do not trust the amnesties because they do not offer exemption from being drafted into military service, and they explicitly exclude persons who have committed certain crimes, such as those under the anti-terrorism law. It is precisely these crimes that returnees fear to be accused of.²⁴⁸

Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that deserters had not made use of the amnesties. In former opposition-held areas, many deserters and defectors, who were supposed to be granted amnesty through the reconciliation deals, ended up in detention centres or died in detention.²⁴⁹ SNHR estimated that only a few dozen men had surrendered themselves to make use of the 2019 amnesty, because many had heard of Syrians, who had tried to make use of similar amnesties, and who were arrested and tortured or disappeared.²⁵⁰ Asaad Hanna had heard of deserters who had made use of the amnesties, but who were nonetheless arrested and imprisoned for a few months and then sent to military service.²⁵¹

However, there were sources who stated that men who made use of the amnesties were not punished but taken to military service.²⁵² This is also the case for Syrian men returning from Lebanon, according to Elizabeth Tsurkov. The source did not know if these were conscripts or reservists, or the number of men that had made use of the September 2019 amnesty.²⁵³ According to Al-Ghazi, some evaders have availed themselves of the amnesties issued by the GoS. These evaders have been sent to military training and then

²⁴⁵ Please note that a new amnesty was issued in March 2020, during the drafting of this report (AP-News, *Syrian president issues amnesty, reduces sentences*, 22 March 2020, [url](#))

²⁴⁶ AP-News, *Syrian president issues amnesty, reduces sentences*, 22 March 2020, [url](#); Reuters, *Syria's Asaad issues amnesty reducing punishment for crimes*, 15 September 2019, [url](#); Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), *TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁷ Gregory Waters: 27; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 81; TDA: 133; SNHR: 360; A humanitarian organisation: 338; Fabrice Balanche 112; Rami: 179

²⁴⁸ Western diplomat: 311

²⁴⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 286, 287

²⁵⁰ SNHR: 360

²⁵¹ Asaad Hanna: 251

²⁵² Elizabeth Tsurkov: 80; A humanitarian organisation: 338; Omran Studies: 227

²⁵³ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 80, 81

transferred to military bases in Syria like regular conscripts.²⁵⁴ The Syrian activist Rami assumed that there had been cases in which the GoS had implemented amnesties for evaders and deserters, but also cases in which the GoS had not. Today, however, the GoS respects the amnesties more than it previously did, according to the source.²⁵⁵

Hanna said that the GoS did not respect the amnesties, and he merely considered the GoS-amnesties as propaganda.²⁵⁶ Likewise, based on interviews with Syrian returnees conducted by HRW, none of the amnesties issued since 2016 have been respected by the GoS.²⁵⁷ SNHR mentioned that the general amnesty of September 2019 had not been implemented by the GoS.²⁵⁸

3.3.1. Amnesty issued on 22 March 2020

On 22 March, the GoS issued a decree that gave amnesty to persons who had committed crimes and felonies before 22 March 2020. The amnesty covers crimes committed since the conflict began in 2011, and it covers crimes such as anti-government activity online and some acts of terrorism. The 22 March 2020 amnesty decree also covers draft evaders. Army deserters inside Syria can likewise make use of the amnesty if they surrender within three months, while those outside the country have six months to surrender.²⁵⁹ DIS has not been able to independently verify whether the amnesty issued on 22 March 2020 has been implemented by the Syrian government before the publication of this report.

3.4. Possible consequences for family members of evaders and deserters

3.4.1. Possible consequences for family members of draft evaders

Most sources stated that families of draft evaders would not face any consequences as a result of a family member's draft evasion.²⁶⁰ The humanitarian organisation had not heard, from the families it had been in contact with in the last few years, that the families had faced any problem or harassment due to the evasion.²⁶¹ TDA said that none of the families of draft evaders, whom the source knew of, had faced any issue with the GoS as a consequence of the evasion of a family member. Some of those evaders are residing in Lebanon or in Western countries.²⁶²

According to the Syrian activist Rami, earlier in the conflict, the whole family would be persecuted, but in the course of time, the GoS has become more lenient as there is a large number of evaders, and every family in Syria has a family member who has evaded or deserted. The GoS has thus not the capacity or the will to punish so many individuals.²⁶³

Jusoor for Studies added that family members, who fled Syria together with a draft evader, would not face any problems with the GoS upon return to Syria. The source knew a lot of families who fled Syria with an evading family member, and who went back to Syria in the recent years. These families have not faced any

²⁵⁴ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 285

²⁵⁵ Rami: 179

²⁵⁶ Asaad Hanna: 250

²⁵⁷ HRW: 53

²⁵⁸ SNHR: 360

²⁵⁹ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 288; AP-News, *Syrian president issues amnesty, reduces sentences*, 22 March 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ TDA: 135; Rami: 180; Jusoor for Studies: 200; Omran Studies: 228; Asaad Hanna: 252; A humanitarian organisation: 339

²⁶¹ A humanitarian organisation: 339

²⁶² TDA: 135

²⁶³ Rami: 180

problems with the Syrian authorities.²⁶⁴ This information corroborated with the statements of other consulted sources.²⁶⁵

However, several sources advised that the house of the family would be searched several times by the military police or the intelligence services and pressure and harassment could occur during the visit.²⁶⁶

According to two sources, there have been cases of family members being arrested or told to report to an intelligence service branch for questioning.²⁶⁷ Omran Studies knew of cases in which the brothers of evaders were arrested because of the evaders' active fighting against the GoS. In another case, a father had to sell his house to afford a bribe, because the GoS knew that the evader was part of an Islamist group.²⁶⁸

A western diplomat mentioned that reporting of family members of evaders could lead to enforced disappearances of family members. The same source assumed that the authorities did not only put pressure on immediate family members, such as mothers, fathers, siblings and children, but also on grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins.²⁶⁹

Furthermore the source mentioned the officer in charge, the family, and other allegations against the person as factors determining the treatment that the families of draft evaders had received. However, the source underlined that obtaining confirmed information on the workings of the Syrian intelligence agencies in such cases was difficult.²⁷⁰

3.4.2 Possible consequences for family members of deserters and defectors

A number of consulted sources mentioned that family members of deserters and defectors would not face any consequences from the GoS if a family member had deserted from the SAA.²⁷¹ According to the sources, desertion from the SAA does no longer entail consequences for family members of deserters, as it did previously during the conflict.²⁷² Jusoor knew families who had not faced any problems with the GoS when they went back to Syria in the recent years, despite having fled Syria with a deserting family member.²⁷³

However, other sources advised that family members of deserters and defectors may face consequences. House visits, harassment, threats, arrest, interrogation, torture, confiscation of property and pressure were among the consequences mentioned by these sources, which desertion or defection may entail.²⁷⁴

The sources mentioned different factors determining the extent to which the families of deserters and defectors would be subjected to the above-mentioned practices, including the rank of the deserter/defector, the area in which the family lives, the intelligence service responsible for the area, the officer in charge and the religious background of the family. Family members of high-ranking deserters and

²⁶⁴ Jusoor for Studies: 200-201

²⁶⁵ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 40; Asaad Hanna: 252; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 290

²⁶⁶ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 289; HRW: 55, 56; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 83; Western diplomat: 312; Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 40

²⁶⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 83; Western diplomat: 312

²⁶⁸ Omran Studies: 229

²⁶⁹ Western diplomat: 312, 314

²⁷⁰ Western diplomat: 312-315, In the special case of Suwayda province, local authorities have been able to shield thousands of evaders from the GoS, but these local authorities are under constant pressure to hand these evaders over to GoS.

²⁷¹ TDA: 135; Rami: 180; Jusoor for Studies: 200; Asaad Hanna: 252; A humanitarian organisation: 339

²⁷² Jusoor for Studies: 200, 201; Rami: 180; Asaad Hanna: 252;

²⁷³ Jusoor for Studies: 201

²⁷⁴ SNHR: 364; Elizabeth Tsurkov: 83, 86; Omran Studies: 230

defectors, and families from rebel-held areas, thus, risked facing consequences for desertion and defection to a larger extent compared to low-ranking deserters/defectors and those from government-controlled areas.²⁷⁵

Whilst Tsurkov stated that desertion and defection only had consequences for immediate family members,²⁷⁶ the western diplomat and Al-Ghazi considered that it also had consequences for extended family members (uncle, cousin, aunt etc.).²⁷⁷ However, Tsurkov noted that it could be hard to distinguish whether a family was punished for the act of desertion itself, or because the person, for instance, had joined the opposition.²⁷⁸

Aymenn Al-Tamimi assumed that families would face consequences similar to those mentioned above, although he was not aware of any specific cases.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Suhail Al-Ghazi: 293, 294; SNHR: 363; Asaad Hanna: 252; Western diplomat: 313, 315

²⁷⁶ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 84

²⁷⁷ Western diplomat: 314; Suhail Al-Ghazi: 291, 292

²⁷⁸ Elizabeth Tsurkov: 84, 85

²⁷⁹ Aymenn Al-Tamimi: 40

Consulted sources

Oral sources

- Gregory Waters, researcher and editor at International Review
- Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, researcher and PhD student at Swansea University
- Sara Kayyali, Human Rights Watch (HRW)
- Elizabeth Tsurkov, fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute
- Fabrice Balanche, associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon
- Abbas Almousa, The Day After (TDA), a Syrian-led civil society organization
- Jomah Alqasem, WATAN Foundation
- Rami, Syrian activist
- Mohammad Sarmini, Jusoor for Studies, independent research institution
- Navvar Shaban, information unit manager at Omran Center for Strategic Studies
- Asaad Hanna, journalist and researcher
- Suhail Al-Ghazi, independent researcher and Co-founder of Verify-Sy and Syria in Context Newsletter
- A western diplomat based in Beirut
- A humanitarian organisation working in Syria
- Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)

Written sources

- Almanar TV, *أمر إدارياً جديداً تصدره القيادة العامة للجيش السوري* [The General Army Command of the SAA issues a new administrative order], January 2019, <https://almanar.com.lb/4814735> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Almodon, *إلغاء الموافقات الأمنية للوكالات الخارجية* [Cancellation of security approvals for foreign agencies], 22 October 2018, <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2018/10/22/%D8%A5%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%88%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%83%D9%84-3-%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Alwatan, *زيادة في إصدار جوازات السفر من قبل المغتربين* [An increase in the issuance of passports by expatriates], 19 August 2019, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/208906> (accessed 20 March 2020)
- Alwatan, *إلغاء الموافقات على وكالات الزواج والطلاق وتثبيت الملكية وجوازات السفر* [Cancellation of approvals for marriage, divorce, confirmation of ownership and issuing passports], 21 October 2018, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/170780> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Atlantic Council, *Forced conscription continues despite amnesty by Syrian Government*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/forced-conscription-continues-despite-amnesty-by-syrian-government/> (accessed 30 March 2020)
- AP-News, *Syrian president issues amnesty, reduces sentences*, 22 March 2020, <https://apnews.com/52402b39db2cdc39366418acf9cbf6d0> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF), *Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, Briefing Notes*, 21 October 2019, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2020343/Deutschland_Bundesamt_f%C3%BCr_Migration_und_Fl%C3%BCchtlinge%2C_Briefing_Notes%2C_21.10.2019_%28englisch%29.pdf, p. 6 (accessed 30 March 2020)
- Carnegie Middle East Center, *Changes to Syria's conscription law will prevent the repairing of relations between the armed forces and civilians*, 20 February 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81107> (accessed 29 March 2020)
- Carnegie Middle East Center, *Russia and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities*, 26 March 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/26/russia-and-syrian-military-reform-challenges-and-opportunities-pub-81154> (accessed 20 April 2020)

- Chatham House, *Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters*, July 2018, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/joining-the-enemy-how-the-syrian-regime-reintegrates-former-rebel-fighters> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, https://www.nyidanmark.dk/-/media/Files/US/Landerapporter/iraq_report_security_IDPs_and_access_nov2018.pdf?la=da&hash=D47A2A6F75ACFE9C27B25B6E50C85515975A6B72 (accessed 8 April 2020)
- EASO (European Asylum Support Office), *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, June 2019, https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2019_EASO_COI_Report_Methodology.pdf (accessed 9 April 2020)
- EASO (European Asylum Support Office), *Country of Origin Report, Syria: Targeting of Individuals*, March 2020, <https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/easo-coi-report-syria-targeting-individuals.pdf>, p. 31-33 (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Economy2Day, *كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البديل* [Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee], 15 December 2018, <https://www.economy2day.com/new/%D9%83%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%84> (accessed 25 March 2020)
- Enabbaladi, *إجراءات جديدة لجني الأموال من المتخلفين عن الخدمة العسكرية* [New procedures for making money from those who have dodged military service], 22 December 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/350620#ixzz6IMIARiSH> (accessed 25 March 2020)
- Enabbaladi, *Military Service Exemption Fee: Expensive Return Ticket To Homeland*, 2 September 2019, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/09/military-service-exemption-fee-expensive-return-ticket-to-homeland/> (accessed 26 March 2020)
- Eqtsad, *زيارة القطر "لشباب السوريين.. تجارب، وتفاصيل عن التكاليف والثبوتيات المطلوبة"* [“Visit of the Country” for young Syrian men: Cases, details about the cost and the documents required] 31 October 2019, <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/27804/> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Facebook, Eqtsad, https://ar-ar.facebook.com/pg/eqtsad/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Facebook group, *بدنا قانون يحمي العسكري- بدنا نتسرح* [We want a law that protects soldiers - we want to be discharged"], <https://www.facebook.com/884086391798395/photos/%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%88->

<https://www.migration.gov.uk/immigration-uk/visas/entry-clearance/entry-clearance-requirements/entry-clearance-requirements-for-syria> (accessed 8 April 2020)

- Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/Syria_Fact-finding+mission+to+Beirut+and+Damascus%2C+April+2018.pdf (accessed 8 April 2020)
- MEI and Etana (Middle East Institute and Etana), *Forgotten Lives: Life under regime rule in former opposition-held East Ghouta*, 14 May 2019, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-05/Forgotten%20Lives_East%20Ghouta.pdf (accessed 20 April 2020)
- Nedaa Syria, *النظام السوري ينشر تفاصيل جديدة عن بدل الخدمة العسكرية [Syrian regime publishes new details on military service exemption fee]*, 5 May 2019, <https://www.nedaa-sy.com/news/13371> (accessed 12 April 2020)
- Norway, Landinfo, *Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrulling, utsettelse og fritak*, 14 November 2017, <https://landinfo.no/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Syria-temanotat-Milit%C3%A6rtjeneste-innrulling-utsettelse-og-fritak-14112017.pdf>, p. 7 (accessed 9 April 2020)
- Norway, Landinfo, Report, *Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1441219/1226_1534943446_landinfo-report-syria-reactions-against-deserters-and-draft-evaders.pdf (accessed 29 March 2020)
- Orient News Net, *لماذا أرسلت ميليشيا أسد ضباطاً من الحرس الجمهوري إلى مدينة حلب؟ [Why did the Assad militia send Republican Guard officers to the city of Aleppo?]*, 18 November 2019, https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/174215/0/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8 (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Orient News Net, *Hezbollah arrests Syrians and Assad regime executes them*, 02 August 2019, https://orient-news.net/en/news_show/170214/Hezbollah-arrests-Syrians-and-Assad-regime-executes-them (accessed 12 April 2020)
- SACD (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity), *Vengeance, repression, and fear: The reality behind Assad's promises to displaced Syrians*, October 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/vengeance-repression-and-fear-reality-behind-assads-promises-displaced-syrians> (accessed 8 April 2020)

- SACD (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity), *Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear*, 24 July 2019, <https://medium.com/@SACD/reconciling-with-death-disappearance-and-fear-6e17fe2456aa> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency), *قيادة العامة للجيش: إنهاء الاحتفاظ والاستدعاء للضباط الاحتياطيين ممن أتموا ثلاث سنوات ولصف الضباط والأفراد ممن بلغت خدمتهم الاحتياطية الفعلية 7 سنوات [General Army Command: Ending the retention and recall of reserve officers, who have completed three years, and of non-commissioned officers and personnel whose actual reserve service has reached 7 years]* 29 March 2020, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1129834> (accessed 29 March 2020)
- SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency), *القيادة العامة للجيش تستبعد الاحتياطيين المدعويين من مواليد 1981 وما قبل من دعوات الاحتياط [The General Army Command excludes called up reservists born in 1981 and earlier]*, 6 February 2019, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=890508> (accessed 20 March 2020)
- SAWA for Development and Aid, *Unpacking Return – Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns*, February 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SAWA_Unpacking%20Return%20Report.pdf (accessed 9 April 2020)
- Sinmarnews.com, *اللواء ناجي تركي النمير مدير إدارة الهجرة والجوازات يتحدث لموقع سنمار سورية الاخباري في "حوار خاص [Major General Naji Turki Al-Numair, Director of the Immigration and Passports Department, speaks to the Syrian Sinmar news website in an exclusive interview]*, May 7 2019, <https://sinmarnews.com/article/start/?p=56104> (accessed 21 April 2020)
- Sweden, Lifos Migrationsverket, *Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst* (version 3.0), 30 May 2017, <https://lifos.migrationsverket.se/dokument?documentSummaryId=39733> (accessed 25 March 2020)
- Sweden, Migrationsverket and Finland, FIS, *SYRIA: MILITARY SERVICE, NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES, ARMED GROUPS SUPPORTING SYRIAN REGIME AND ARMED OPPOSITION*, 23 August 2016, https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/70972_Report_Military_Service_Final.pdf/0829bd47-fd3e-49c7-8a7f-59e8fe2c1029/70972_Report_Military_Service_Final.pdf.pdf (accessed 29 March 2020)
- Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Defense, *الوحيد [Only male child]*, <http://www.mod.gov.sy/index.php?node=556&cat=337&> (accessed 1 April 2020)
- Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, *البدل النقدي [Exemption Fee]*, <http://www.mofa.gov.sy/ar/pages155/البدل-النقدي> (accessed 4 April 2020)
- Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, *تسوية وضع [Sorting out one's issues]* <http://www.mofa.gov.sy/ar/pages897/تسوية-وضع> (accessed 10 April 2020)

- Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, دليل المواطن لدفع البديل النقدي [Citizen's Guidelines for Paying the Exemption Fee], <http://www.mofa.gov.sy/uploads/tajneed/5-daleel.pdf> (accessed 10 April 2020)
- Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, دليل المواطن لاستبعاد المكلف بالاحتياط [Citizen's guidelines for being excluded from reserve], <http://www.mofaex.gov.sy/uploads/tajneed/1-daleel.pdf> (accessed 25 March 2020)
- Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Consulate in Manama, Bahrain, تعليمات التقدم بطلب تسهيل زيارة إلى قطر للمواطنين المتخلفين عن خدمة العلم [Instructions to apply for a visit to the country for citizens who failed to report for enlistment], <http://www.mofa.gov.sy/bahrain-embassy/ar/pages571/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85> (accessed 6 April 2020)
- Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, زيارة المغترب [Visit of the Expatriate], <http://www.syrianembassy.se/Engelska/> (accessed 10 April 2020)
- Syrian Arab Army, The Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, Syrian Citizens Affairs, <http://www.syrianembassy.se/Engelska/> (accessed 7 March 2020)
- Syria direct, As losses mount in Idlib, Damascus sends conscripts from "reconciled" areas to the front, 4 March 2020, <https://syriadirect.org/news/as-losses-mount-in-idlib-damascus-sends-conscripts-from-%E2%80%9Creconciled%E2%80%9D-areas-to-the-front/> (accessed 8 April 2020)
- Syria direct, Latest amnesty decree 'empty talk' for Syrian army defectors living in displacement, 18 October 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/latest-amnesty-decree-%E2%80%98empty-talk%E2%80%99-for-syrian-army-defectors-living-in-displacement/> (accessed 28 March 2020)
- Syria Untold, Men evading military service in southern Syria's Suwayda feel 'trapped', 9 January 2020, <https://syriauntold.com/2020/01/09/men-evading-military-service-in-southern-syrias-suwayda-feel-trapped/> (accessed 25 March 2020)
- Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law, 22 August 2019, <https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-conscription-law/> (accessed 27 March 2020)
- The Defense Post, Fearing conscription into Assad's army, Syrian Kurds flee to Iraq, 12 December 2019, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/12/12/syria-refugees-conscription/> (accessed 8 April 2020)

- The Syrian Observer, *Hezbollah Arrests Them, and the Regime Executes Them*, 2 August 2019, https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/52083/hezbollah-arrests-them-and-the-regime-executes-them.html?fbclid=IwAR39C4bUCdtJkmF_xxRqdkP1uPsKu8dV89nX4FHSDpYPaQ2grp5FgOKtrqU (accessed 6 April 2020)
- UNOHCHR (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, 20 December 2006, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/ced/pages/conventionced.aspx> (accessed 30 April 2020)
- Waseela TV, *The demobilization of a 48 years old reservist stir tumult on social media* [تسريح عسكري [احتياط وهو بعمر الـ 48 يثير ضجة على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي], 3 February 2019, <https://www.waseelatv.com/2019/02/03/%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%88%D9%87%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%80-48-%D9%8A%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B6/> (accessed 10 April 2020)

Appendix 1: Meeting minutes

Skype meeting with Gregory Waters, based in California, 30 January 2020

Gregory Waters is researching the Syrian government and the Islamic State via Facebook. He is a writer and managing editor at International Review and contributor to Middle East Institute, Bellingcat and Open Democracy.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

1. Since the GoS recaptured Damascus and Daraa in late 2018, recruitment has been at a steady, high level. The Russians and the SAA high command have put a lot of emphasis on rebuilding the highly depleted SAA divisions and brigades through recruitment throughout the last two years. For example last year, there was emphasis on new recruitment to expand some depleted divisions in the east.
2. Recruitment takes place more intensively in some areas, such as southern Damascus, East Ghouta, Babella, Daraa, Quneitra and the newly captured areas of Hama and Idlib.
3. The fighting in Idlib has had an effect on recruitment.
4. Whether or not a person from the reconciled areas has finished his military service, this person has no choice but to go back to the military because there are no employment opportunities. Many regular SAA units have recruited among reconciled rebels (e.g. the 1st, 7th, 9th and 3rd division). The 5th corps recruits heavily from southern reconciled communities. There seems to be a variance in the proportion of conscripts in the divisions. Specifically the 4th and 17th divisions are using conscripts.
5. People serve voluntarily in pro-government militias unless they are from a reconciled area in which case the source assumes that they did not join voluntarily. But if a person is in a militia and he is not from a reconciled area, he has joined voluntarily because it is better.
6. According to the source, the GoS has not started to reintroduce compulsory military service in newly conquered areas of North-East Syria. In the areas that the GoS already had control over in Hasakah and Qamishli, the GoS has continuously been recruiting locals in these areas who wanted to join the SAA voluntarily. The source mentions a case from 2018 when 150 men from Hasakah showed up in government-controlled areas and said that they wanted to sort out their affairs and join the army.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

7. No specific profile gets deployed to the frontline. Both conscripts and reservists from all areas under the control of the GoS are being deployed to the front. The source's information is based on martyr notices, announced by the SAA, and the photos that he has seen of SAA's casualties.
8. Reservists from all over Syria (including Tartous, Latakia, Damascus, Homs, Suweida) and from multiple units are fighting at all fronts. The source assumes, however, that the deployment of reservists to the frontline is minimal.

9. It varies by unit whether the SAA relies on first time conscripts, professional soldiers or reservists at the frontline.
10. Conscripts and reservists from reconciled areas are being deployed to the front. However, deploying a person to the front does not depend on his area of origin (e.g. from a reconciled area) but rather on whether his unit gets deployed to the front, and the SAA is not making units composed solely of men from reconciled areas.
11. Draft evaders are also being deployed to the front.
12. More recently, some people have been able to avoid being deployed to the frontline by paying a bribe, which was not possible previously because of the higher demand for manpower. The source also mentions the case of a person who was in the 4th division and whose family was Sunni but very well connected within the military. This person managed to avoid being deployed to the front and managed to serve at the motor pool instead, because he was a mechanic.
13. Men get deployed to the frontline for different duties, and not necessarily for fighting. However, throughout the last year, the SAA has been rotating its units, so everyone could somehow get involved in fighting. Therefore, the source assumes that most men who have been deployed to the front in this period have at some point been involved in frontline fighting.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

14. The source has no information about the SAA currently discharging men but points out that the SAA does not seem to discharge people very often. The source has only heard that Class 102, which graduated around 2011, was discharged in spring 2018 after having been fighting throughout the war.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

15. Recruitment to the SAA takes place in a variety of ways, e.g. campaigns, raids, checkpoints, house visits.
16. The GoS arrests men wanted for military service. The source has information that some of those people arrested, including draft evaders, regular criminals and other wanted people, are given the choice between going to prison or to be deployed with the 4th or 17th division in the desert to fight the Islamic State.
17. In reconciled communities (that are surrounded by checkpoints), for years there have been reports about young men getting arrested and conscripted when trying to cross a checkpoint. According to the reconciliation agreements in these areas, all men had six months to sort out their affairs with the authorities before being conscripted, and if they voluntarily sorted out their affairs with the authorities, they would have a say as to whether they would join a local militia or the SAA and be deployed to the front. However, in most cases, e.g. in al-Tal in northern Damascus, the GoS started conscripting before the six months grace period was over.

18. The source assumes that there is less pressure and less conscription in the Alawite communities of Latakia, Tartous, Hama and Homs than in reconciled communities. However, an Alawite will also be conscripted if there is a raid, but he might be able to avoid serving in the 4th or 17th division and being sent to the frontline.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

19. The source has not seen reports of the SAA having conscripted persons under the age of 18. He assumes that the persons under the age of 18 who died at the frontline in 2019 were recruits of pro-government militias and not SAA conscripts.
20. Neither has the source received information about the SAA forcefully drafting men over the age of 42. However, there are reports indicating that men over the age of 42 have joined the local militia.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

21. The source does not know whether the SAA has conscripted only sons. There have been cases of only sons being killed in battle but the source does not know whether these were SAA conscripts or from pro-government militias.
22. The source has no information about whether the GoS respects the exemption for medical reasons.

Implementation of the exemption fee

23. The source has no information about the exemption fee or whether or how it is being implemented.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

24. If the family of the evader is well-connected and wealthy enough, they could pay and use their connections to get their evading family member assigned to duties away from front. However, in most cases, the draft evader will be deployed to the front to fight or to patrol around Islamic State-controlled desert.
25. The source has no information about the punishment for deserters but assumes that it is worse than the punishment for evaders. He assumes that the punishment for desertion is prison or execution.
26. The source has no information about what the punishment would be for a person who fled Syria and has lived abroad and upon return to Syria has exceeded the age of 42. He has heard stories of people over 42 coming back from Jordan or Lebanon who were still recruited to serve as reservists upon return to Syria. *When sending the minutes to the source asking for his approval of it, the source was requested to inform the delegation whether these stories were confirmed, and if the source could refer the delegation to written reports on these cases. However, the delegation did not receive an answer to these questions.*

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

27. The source has no information about the GoS not respecting the latest amnesty of September 2019 and does not know how many have made use of the amnesty and have turned themselves in.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

28. The source has no information about whether desertion or evasion has consequences for family members.

Skype meeting with Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, based in London, 31 January 2020

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi is a PhD student at Swansea University and an independent analyst focusing on Syria, Iraq and the Islamic State.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

29. The issue of lack of manpower and people deserting still exists as a problem but it is not as bad as it used to be. The recruitment into the SAA has increased over the last year. Retaking control over many areas during summer 2018 made more manpower available for the SAA.
30. There has been intensive recruitment to the regular army of people from areas that have been retaken like Madaya, Zabadani, Douma and other areas in East Ghouta.
31. There has been less recruitment to the SAA in Daraa compared to East Ghouta. The reconciliation agreement with the militias in summer 2018 included that fighters could either join the SAA or pro-government militias. Only few men from Daraa decided to serve in the regular army to avoid being called up for military service in the future. However, they risked being sent to the Idlib front. Most men decided to stay in Daraa and serve in local pro-government forces in order to serve in and protect their areas.
32. The reconciliation agreements regarding recruitment were not implemented by the GoS in Rural Damascus. For instance, as a part of the reconciliation agreement with the Hermon area, the GoS promised that serving in the local militia force, the Hermon Regiment, would be equivalent to doing military service. However, the regiment was dismantled and conscripts were therefore compelled to sign up for the SAA.
33. The SAA has presence at borders and checkpoints in Northeast Syria, but it does not have any administrative authority in that area. Because of that the government is not able to recruit people to the regular army there. Northeast Syria is still under the control of the SDF, and the Kurdish administration is the only administrative authority that recruits conscripts and reservists to its forces.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

34. The SAA sends both conscripts and reservists to the front. The SAA sends conscripts to the frontlines regardless of the conscript's sect, area of residence, qualifications etc. For example, conscripts who originate from areas that are loyal to the GoS, such as coastal areas and Homs, and men who belong to the Alawite sect, are also sent to the front.

35. Although Russia, Iran and different foreign militias participate in the fighting at the frontlines, Syrian fighters constitute the bulk of manpower sent to the front. The SAA also sends a lot of conscripts and reservists to guard unsecure areas such as the desert of Homs and Deir Ezzor, where the Islamic State conducts insurgency attacks.
36. There is no guarantee that conscripts or reservists in the SAA, who are not participating in active fighting at the frontline, will remain in the same position and area of duty, unless they pay bribes or have good connections. For instance, conscripts guarding checkpoints may risk being deployed to the frontline.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

37. Mainly, the GoS recruits wanted people for military service at checkpoints. Therefore, wanted conscripts and reservists who do not want to serve in the SAA, usually stay inside their hometown to avoid being caught at checkpoints.
38. The GoS has also set up recruitment branches and offices in areas such as East Ghouta and former opposition-held areas

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

39. Currently, if a person evades or deserts he would be put on a wanted list. If caught by the authorities, both evaders and deserters are sent to the SAA. Few years ago, men who deserted from active fighting could be imprisoned or executed, but this is not the case anymore.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

40. The source assumes that family members of evaders or deserters may risk facing some harassment, such as being detained and questioned, as a consequence of their family member's evasion or desertion. However, the source has not heard about people who have faced difficulties with the authorities solely because their family member had evaded or deserted.

Meeting with Sara Kayyali, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Copenhagen, 5 February 2020

Sara Kayyali is a Syria researcher in the Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch, where she researches human rights and international humanitarian law violations in Syria.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

41. The source does not have information on this issue.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

42. Deployment of conscripted returnees and IDPs to the frontlines of Idlib occurs. The source has focused her research on areas retaken by the GoS in 2018 and most of the data on deployment of conscripts to the frontlines stems from areas such as the southern parts of Syria, e.g. Daraa, areas in Rural Damascus, e.g. East Ghouta and Zabadani, areas in Homs province and also areas in Deir Ezzor province.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

43. The last discharge from the SAA happened in mid-2019. The list of discharged individuals included the names of 20 individuals that had served since 2009. The source was not able to confirm whether the individuals were actually released or if their names just featured on a list of discharged individuals.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

44. Recruitment of conscripts and reservists continues to occur at checkpoints in government-controlled areas of Syria.

45. Notifications (استدعاء *istidaa'*) are sent to the houses of men asking them to enlist for military service.

46. When the GoS retook East Ghouta in Rural Damascus province in May 2018, men were being conscripted to the SAA directly from displacement centres. Conscripts were sent to military training camps and then subsequently to the frontlines, according to their relatives and local humanitarian sources.

47. The GoS has generally not respected the reconciliation agreements in former rebel-held areas with regards to military service. Most persons who signed the reconciliation deals did not receive any documentation that could prove that there was a six months grace period before they could be taken to military service. However, even where individuals received a paper – which was rare – they reported violations. The source knows of examples in which persons were conscripted after only two months or two weeks. In these cases, conscription took place through notifications, house visits or at checkpoints. The source has not heard of cases in the south of Syria where the six month grace period was respected by the GoS.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

48. The source is not aware of any cases in which individuals under the age of 18 were recruited to military service in the SAA.

49. The source does not have information that men above 42 are currently being recruited to the SAA.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

50. Most draft evaders who were caught in 2019 were either detained or had to pay a fine, and were afterwards conscripted and sent to the frontlines. The source mentions a case in which a person evaded military service, and his parents were forced to pay a fine for his evasion. He was then conscripted into the SAA and sent to the Idlib front, from where he later deserted and left Syria.

51. When asked if the GoS had taken other initiatives to encourage draft evaders and deserters abroad to return to Syria, the source mentioned the following example: In late 2018 there was a public outreach campaign to young Syrian men living in Turkey who had not served in the military. The GoS called individuals on their phones and told them that it would be safe to return to Syria and that they would not risk any punishment for draft evasion nor be conscripted to military service.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

52. Several amnesties were issued by the Syrian government in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and the last one in March 2020. The source has not had a chance to examine the 2020 amnesty in detail, but based on interviews with returned Syrians, none of the amnesty laws that have been issued since 2016 have been respected by the GoS.
53. In interviews conducted in 2019, Syrian draft evaders living abroad told HRW that they did not want to make use of the amnesties because of the fact that the GoS does not respect them.
54. The source knows of draft evaders who wanted to make use of the amnesties and return to Syria. Upon return to Syria, though, some of them were arrested.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

55. For family members of draft evaders, the source knows of cases in which the authorities have shown up at the houses of families of draft evaders and pressured and harassed family members to reveal the whereabouts of their sons. The state security intelligence service in one case sat in the family's garden as a way of pressuring and harassing the family during a house visit. Authorities would visit families of draft evaders weekly or monthly, according to the source.
56. Some of these cases date back to 2018 following the retaking of Ghouta. A couple of cases occurred in January and February 2019 in the south of Syria in Daraa province. These cases were documented by Human Rights Watch. The source assumes that these practices are ongoing.

Skype meeting with Elizabeth Tsurkov, based in New York, 6 February 2020

Elizabeth Tsurkov is a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, focusing on Syria and Iraq. She has been researching Syria for about 11 years.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

57. The current demand is about the same as one year ago, although the SAA is losing manpower at the moment, because SAA soldiers are being killed in large numbers in Idlib and Western Aleppo. Recruitment was more intensive when the GoS was significantly weaker such as in 2016 and 2015.

58. Serving in pro-government militias is not a complete guarantee that the person will not be arrested and conscripted for regular military service in the SAA, according to the source. This happened to some former rebels who reconciled with the GoS and joined the pro-government militias in order to avoid military service.
59. The GoS has not reintroduced compulsory military service in the areas where they have joint control with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the north-eastern part of Syria. There are some Arabs who live in SDF-controlled areas who join the SAA because they expect the GoS to return to their areas and thus want to demonstrate their loyalty to the GoS. There are also Arabs from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor who serve in the SAA.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

60. Conscripts and reservists are deployed to the front. Although pro-government militias are also fighting at the frontline, conscripts make up the majority of fighters.
61. Everyone in the ranks of the SAA is at risk of being sent to the frontline as there are no specific profiles being deployed and there are rotations of SAA units. For example, the source knows of fighters from Homs who were fighting in Idlib, but who are currently engaged in heavy fighting with the Islamic State in Tadmour.
62. However, if a person is rich, he can pay a bribe to serve far from the frontline, and if he is very rich, he can pay his way out of service. But the majority of Syrians are very poor and have no way out of military service.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

63. Men who had served since 2010, Class 102 and 103, got discharged in 2017. Others were supposed to be discharged but were not. Discharge is not based on units, because units are mixed of people who have served for different periods of time.
64. At the end of March 2020, the GoS announced new discharges for soldiers serving since 2012 and 2013 without interruption (anyone who evaded service has not been discharged), as well as reserve duty officers who have been serving for over seven years. The GoS has never discharged men after having served for 18 or 21 months, and is highly unlikely to do so, as the GoS can extend people's service through the reserve duty officially.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

65. The source has not seen as many arrest raids, e.g. in Damascus or Latakia, as previously, when the GoS was significantly weaker in 2015 and 2016, and the authorities were entering people's homes to conscript.
66. In areas that have reconciled with the GoS, such as East Ghouta, Qalamoun and southern Damascus, the secret police and military police still conduct raids into people's homes. Otherwise, people are currently getting arrested in government institutions, if they, for instance, need to renew their papers,

at hospitals and at checkpoints. For this reason, many men, who are wanted for military service, stay in their homes to avoid arrest.

67. Men in reconciled areas, who had to sort out their affairs with the GoS to avoid arrest, had to go through interrogation, in which they had to provide information about relatives and friends who had participated in any kind of opposition activity, humanitarian work or work in the medical field. Once they had completed this process, they were usually given six months grace, as stipulated in the reconciliation agreements, before they had to serve. However, the GoS has repeatedly not respected this grace period and has arrested and drafted men before the six months were over.
68. The source has closely tracked the recruitment of people from closed IDP camps set up by the GoS in East Ghouta. During the offensive on East Ghouta in 2018, the authorities arrested people who tried to escape the area and took them directly to detention centres where they underwent interrogation. Many men stayed there for months, basically in detention under harsh conditions until some “volunteered” to enlist in the SAA and some were conscripted to military service.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

69. The SAA does not recruit persons under the age of 18, but the pro-government militias do in large numbers, e.g. Syrian Hezbollah, the Local Defense Forces (LDF) etc. According to the source, under-age boys firstly join out of economic necessity as there are no jobs and the economy is destroyed. Secondly, they join pro-government militias for security reasons; people are afraid of being perceived as disloyal by the GoS and thus join pro-government militias to prove their loyalty to the GoS.
70. The source is not familiar with men over 42 being drafted to the SAA.
71. The source does not know about a new decree from late 2019 that stipulates that the new maximum age for recruitment is 38, but she knows a case in which a 40-year old man got arrested and conscripted in late 2019, but she does not know whether this was before or after the decree came out.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

72. The source does not know of cases where men who are only sons of their family have been drafted to the SAA.
73. If a person is handicapped, he will not be recruited for military service, and if he were already serving and got handicapped, he would be discharged. However, a man has to lose a limb or be very sick in order to be exempted from military service and even then, he may have to pay a bribe to be exempted. The source knows of Syrian soldiers who shot themselves in the leg or arm in order to be exempted. These men were sent back to military service after recovering.
74. The source knows people inside Syria who have serious mental disorders as a result of what they are witnessing. Those people are deeply traumatised, e.g. people with drinking problems, PTSD, depression and/or anxiety, but they are still serving.

Implementation of the exemption fee

75. The source has no information on the implementation of the exemption fee.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

76. The punishment for draft evaders is that they are taken to military service. Whether they get deployed to the front or not depends on the amount of money they are able to pay in bribes.

77. The source knows cases of men who were executed as they were caught while trying to desert including in the last offensive in Idlib in 2020. Some fighters from the 5th Corps were able to successfully defect in Idlib, but others failed and were executed. In addition, in 2019, some SAA and NDF fighters defected to the SDF in Hasakah and Deir Ezzor. Previously, defection used to be a lot easier as most areas of Syria were previously controlled by the opposition hence it was easier to defect.

78. Men who previously defected and joined the armed opposition are particularly vulnerable to arrest, even if they have sorted out their affairs with the authorities. In some cases from Daraa, men were arrested in spite of having sorted out their affairs through reconciliation deals. In Daraa alone, around 15 men who had defected were tortured to death by the Syrian authorities, even though they had sorted out their affairs with the GoS. The source refers to cases from her twitter account: <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1156534458377560065>

79. The source has information from two SAA fighters stationed in Idlib that some soldiers, who attempted to flee the service, were shot dead in Idlib in 2020.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

80. The GoS has not issued any new amnesties since the amnesty of September 2019. Men who make use of the amnesty are not punished but they are taken to military service. All the Syrian men who returned from Lebanon, either through Hizbollah as an intermediary or in any other organised way, made use of the amnesties. Upon return, these men were not punished but taken to military service. The source does not know whether these were all conscripts or if there were reservists among them.

81. The source does not know the number of men who have made use of the amnesty.

82. The source does not know of any other initiatives taken by the GoS besides the amnesties to get people to return.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

83. The source knows of cases where families of males who evaded or defected in 2020 were threatened by the secret police to pressure the young men to surrender themselves for service. If the evader or defector did not hand himself in, the secret police would call the father for questioning or they would arrest him from home.

84. Desertion too has consequences for the deserter's immediate family members because it is seen as a political act. It is difficult for the source, however, to distinguish between whether a person or a family is punished for the desertion act itself or for joining the opposition in case this person joined the opposition after deserting. From the cases of desertion the source has heard of post 2018, desertion has only had consequences for immediate family members and mostly for male family members.
85. Among the possible consequences for family members of deserters are that the intelligence services (the *mukhabarat*) come to the houses of deserters' families, and sometimes they arrest immediate family members.
86. The authorities may also confiscate property of deserters (and also of opposition activists, medical personnel, humanitarian activists) and/or their families. Many officers have had their property confiscated and also some regular soldiers. The source is aware of cases up until the end of 2019, but she assumes that it is likely that confiscations are continuing. Confiscations have taken place in southern Syria and Qalamoun.

Skype meeting with Fabrice Balanche, based in Lyon, 7 February 2020

Fabrice Balanche is an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon and an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute. Today, he is frequently called upon as an expert consultant on Middle East development issues and the Syrian crisis.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

87. There is a strong demand for new troops because the SAA needs new troops for the military campaign in Idlib and new troops for the northeast of Syria, where the Syrian government is currently present. The SAA is especially conscripting men from newly re-taken areas such as Daraa and areas in Rural Damascus. Syrian authorities have stepped up their efforts in these areas to conscript all men in the military service age. In western Daraa province, fear of being conscripted to the SAA has led young men to hide in their homes.
88. The SAA has also increased conscription because the SAA soldiers that have been fighting since 2011 are tired of fighting and wish to be discharged.
89. The SAA has not begun to conscript men in the areas in Northeast Syria in which the army has a presence together with the SDF. Thus no one is currently obliged to do military service in the SAA in SDF-controlled areas in Northeast Syria, not even in areas in which the SAA has a military presence and carries out military patrols.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

90. Both conscripts and reservists get deployed to the frontlines in Idlib and participate in active fighting for the SAA. However, conscripts outnumber reservists considerably.

91. News conscripts with little training, typically those from former opposition-controlled areas, are sent to the frontlines to fight. The SAA wants these conscripts to prove their loyalty to the GoS.
92. The typical profiles of recruits fighting at the frontlines in the Syrian conflict are conscripts as well as experienced fighters from former rebel-held areas, for instance, from Daraa province, who serve in the Russian controlled Fifth Assault Corps (FAC). The former rebel fighters, who were initially promised not to be sent outside of Daraa as part of the reconciliation agreements, are now being sent to the front.
93. The proportion of conscripts deployed to the Idlib frontline versus conscripts deployed to Northeast Syria is around 95 percent and five percent respectively. This is because much less personnel is needed in the Northeast as the tasks of these soldiers typically consist of guarding the border to Turkey.
94. There has been pressure from Alawite and GoS heartlands in Latakia, Tartous, Hama and Homs provinces on the GoS to refrain from recruiting men from these communities to the same extent as before. These communities have provided the majority of fighters throughout the war in Syria and carried the largest burden for the SAA. This was especially the case in the battle in the Kabani Mountains between Latakia province and the Idlib area which featured some of the highest casualty rates for the SAA in the current battles in and around Idlib. There has been considerable dissatisfaction with the GoS and the casualty rates in loyalist communities in Latakia because of this.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

95. In 2018, the conscript class of 2011 was finally discharged from the SAA.
96. The source has heard of individuals that have been discharged from the SAA after 18 months or two years, because they were able to successfully bribe their way out of military service.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

97. The GoS has not adhered to the reconciliation deals that it reached with rebels in areas such as Daraa and East Ghouta in 2018. These agreements stipulated that the GoS would wait six months before conscripting men from these areas and that the GoS would not send men from these areas to the front lines. However, the GoS did conscript men before the six month grace period ended and deployed some of these people to the frontline. In other retaken areas, however, such as Qudssaya in Rural Damascus, the GoS has respected the six month grace period and has not drafted before the end of the grace period.
98. The GoS notifies men who have reached military age to enlist at the local military conscription office. If these men do not enlist voluntarily, they risk being detained at checkpoints, conscripted and sent directly to military training camps. In some cases, some officers in charge of conscription may even arrest men who have the documents proving postponement of their military service in order to extort them and get a bribe.

99. The source is aware of cases in which individuals have bribed their way out of service at the frontlines and have instead served in administrative units. The source is also aware of one case in which a person was called up for reserve duty. He paid approximately 2,000 USD in bribes to have his military service postponed for a couple of months. This allowed the individual to flee Syria and avoid military service.
100. The Syrian authorities no longer conduct house searches to find and conscript potential draft evaders and deserters. The authorities do not go into homes in pro-government areas, such as Latakia and Tartous, because these communities feel that they have already provided too much manpower to the SAA during the Syrian conflict. Neither do the authorities engage in large house searching campaigns in former opposition-held areas (although this would be easier than in GoS loyal areas). In these areas, especially those with a Sunni majority, the GoS may provoke the local community and thereby risk creating new uprisings by conducting house searches.
101. After the GoS took control over East Ghouta in May 2018, men of military age were sent directly to detention centers from where they were conscripted directly into the SAA.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

102. The source has not seen reports of the SAA recruiting or conscripting individuals under the age of 18.
103. Persons under the age of 18 have been known to serve in the National Defense Forces (NDF) which is a government-affiliated militia. Joining the NDF is voluntary and thus they are not forcibly recruited into the NDF. Individuals both over and under the age of 18 may choose to serve in the NDF out of economic reasons to sustain their livelihoods in government-controlled areas. The source has seen examples of individuals under 18 manning checkpoints as NDF-soldiers in Latakia province.
104. The source has not seen information indicating that men over 42 are being drafted into the SAA.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

105. A presidential decree from 2015 stipulates that in families with only one son, the son is exempted from military service. Individuals have been discharged from the SAA because of this decree, and the exemption is implemented in practice by the GoS.
106. Men are being exempted from military service for medical reasons.
107. Military service of university students are still being deferred while they are studying. When moving around, they must carry the right papers indicating that they are university students and proof of the deferral of their military service. These individuals can, for instance, travel freely between Syria and Lebanon without facing any issues from the GoS. The source has seen examples of this from Latakia province but also from the rest of Syria. However, the Syrian Ministry of Education (MoE) will not allow young Syrian men, who have lived in former rebel-held areas during the conflict, to postpone their military service by attending university. The MoE does not recognize high school diplomas of Syrians that have lived in former rebel-held areas during the conflict and completed their secondary

education while an area was under rebel control. Such individuals will therefore be conscripted into the SAA.

Implementation of the exemption fee

108. By paying the exemption fee, Syrians who have stayed abroad can be exempted from military service. The law on exemption fee is generally respected by the GoS. However, as the corruption in Syria also exists among the intelligence service officers that are in charge at Damascus Airport and other borders, the officer in charge may try to get a bribe from a person who has paid the exemption fee and is returning to Syria. The officer might think that the person has a lot of money since he could pay the exemption fee, and therefore the officer could use any excuse to extort such person for money, e.g. something missing in the exemption documents or in the registration of these people in the database of the intelligence service. The source has information on one case about a Syrian man, who had paid the exemption fee, but was nevertheless detained when he arrived at Damascus Airport in summer 2019. The intelligence service assumed that some details were missing in his documents and wanted to clarify the issue while he was detained. He was in detention for 24 hours until he paid an additional bribe and was released. The source got this information through a relative of a friend.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

109. The consequence of draft evasion for the individual evader is unclear to the source as very large numbers of Syrians have evaded, and it would be impossible for GoS to imprison all draft evaders.

110. If a person deserts or defects from the SAA and the individual gets arrested, he will be tried before a military court and given a prison sentence. The prison sentence will be for a short period of time as the SAA needs men to send to the frontlines. The source has no information on possible consequences of deserting or defecting if a deserter or defector voluntarily approaches the Syrian authority.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

111. The source is not aware of any cases in which Syrians have made use of the amnesties for draft evaders and deserters. Syrians consider that these amnesties are not respected by the GoS and that they risk being sent to the frontlines if they try to make use of the amnesties.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

112. There are no consequences for families of draft evaders as the GoS does not retaliate against families of draft evaders.

Skype meeting with Abbas Almousa, The Day After (TDA), based in Berlin, 7 February 2020

TDA is an independent, Syrian-led civil society organization working on supporting a democratic transition, justice and peace in Syria. One of TDA's programs focuses on reform of the security sector, which includes the army and other security institutions. TDA monitors the development in the administrative and human

structure of the SAA and other related issues through contacts inside Syria and by monitoring official websites of the Syrian government, news agencies and other relevant web outlets.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

113. There has been an increased demand for conscripts and reservists for the fight in Idlib. The SAA has recruited a high number of men in the military service age (18-42), especially men from reconciled former opposition-controlled areas such as Daraa.

114. The GoS is not recruiting in the Kurdish areas in the Northeast as it has no authority in those areas.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

115. Mainly recruits who have been trained to obtain specific qualifications in e.g. artillery, combat units etc. are sent to the frontlines. However, anyone who can carry a weapon risks being sent to the front.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

116. Some military classes, who have served for eight or nine years, have been discharged last year. The source has not heard of any person being discharged after serving 18-24 months since 2011.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

117. Many men in the government-controlled areas sign up to do their military service when they reach the obligatory military service age. The Syrian authorities mainly recruit people who try to avoid military service by campaigns and at checkpoints that are controlled by the Syrian intelligence services or pro-government militias. In addition, in former opposition-controlled areas, such as the provinces of Aleppo and Daraa, the authorities recruit men by raiding people's houses and their working places.

118. SAA recruitment in Daraa has led to protests against the GoS and to attacks on military installations.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

119. Regarding recruitment to the SAA, the source had not received information confirming that the GoS has recruited people under the age of 18. However, some pro-government militias have recruited persons under the age of 18 and trained them in order to prepare them for upcoming battles.

120. The source does not have information about whether persons under the age of 18 are recruited by force, however, the source assesses that persons under 18 join pro-government militias because it is their only option to earn an income.

121. The source has not heard of cases of men over the age of 42 being recruited to SAA. However, there is an increased pressure on men who exceed the age of 42 and have not completed their military service. Prior to December 2019, the military service law stipulated that men over 42, who had not completed their military service, would be obligated to pay a very large amount of money to be exempted from military service. In case the person would not pay this fee, a *reserve* seizure of funds would be executed on the movable and immovable assets of this person.

122. In December 2019, the law was amended to stipulate that men, who had reached the age of 42 without serving their military duty, would have to pay an exemption fee or an *executive* seizure of

their movable and immovable assets would be carried out by the GoS. This means that the authorities have the right to confiscate and sell any property owned by the person. The source assesses that this law entails that men, who are about to turn 42 and do not have money to pay the exemption fee, will prefer to join the SAA instead of losing their properties. However, the source does not know of cases of men who have reached the age of 42 and joined the military in order to avoid the confiscation of their properties.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

123. The source has not heard of any case where an only son of a family has not been exempted from military service. All conscripts, who are only sons of their families and whom the source knows of, have been exempted from military service.
124. In practice, people who have lost an organ, e.g. a limb or an eye, are exempted. Exemption for mental illnesses is also implemented by the SAA. It is not possible to know exactly what other medical reasons a person can be exempted for as it depends on the assessment and determination of medical committees.
125. People who get disabled while in service will either be exempted or assigned to positions that do not require carrying and using a weapon, such as administrative positions. Over- and underweight men can also be recruited to administrative positions if it is assessed that their weight will prevent them from conducting basic military duties, including fighting.

Implementation of the exemption fee

126. The source has heard of cases of people paying the exemption fee through the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul. The source has not heard of people being taken to military service upon return to Syria despite having paid the exemption fee.
127. The source assesses that the Syrian authorities would not conscript individuals if they had paid the exemption fee. The GoS exceedingly needs foreign currency and therefore, it has to be credible in exempting those who pay the fee. The source thinks that the GoS has earned and is still earning vast amounts of currency via the exemption fee.
128. In practice, men, who have resided outside Syria for at least four consecutive years, but have not postponed their military service every year at a Syrian diplomatic representation as required by Syrian Military Law, are allowed to make use of the exemption fee. In addition to the fee, they will also have to pay a small amount of money as a fine for not having postponed their military service every year.
129. In practice, the GoS allows draft evaders, who have resided abroad for at least four consecutive years, to make use of the law and pay the exemption fee without further consequences. However, the source assesses that draft evaders living in Western countries as asylum seekers would most likely not make use of this law. These men likely think that the authorities in the Western countries would consider their presence at a Syrian diplomatic representation (applying for exemption from service) as evidence of them not being persecuted by the GoS. Such persons would fear losing their refugee status.

130. Men wanted by the GoS for security related issues, who want to pay the exemption fee, will have to sort out their affairs with GoS first. This can be done by applying for sorting out their affairs (*taswiya*) at a Syrian diplomatic representation. Men, who do not sort out their affairs with the government but pays the exemption fee anyway, are likely to be arrested upon return solely because of those security related issues and not for military service.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

131. Prior to the Syrian conflict in 2011, people who evaded military service Syria but stayed in Syria would be imprisoned for nine months and would then have to serve in the military. People who evaded and fled Syria would be imprisoned for two years upon return to the country. In the recent years, the practice of the GoS has changed. Draft evaders who have been caught by the authorities have been sent directly to military training camps to conduct their military service.

132. Before 2011 and in the first few years of the Syrian conflict, deserters would be considered traitors and executed. In recent years, some deserters who were officers in the SAA have been able to sort out their affairs with the GoS, and some of them have also been allowed to return to their positions in the military. However, some deserters, such as Safwan Bakour, were executed for treason. Many of those who deserted, and who have not sorted out their affairs, are wanted by GoS on charges of terrorism.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

133. The source does not know of persons who have availed themselves of the general amnesties.

134. At the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul, there is an office called the Reconciliation Office where evaders, deserters, activists and people, who are considered opposition, sort out their affairs with the government. According to the source, many people who have been affiliated with the Syrian opposition have reconciled through these offices and returned back to Syria. The source does not know of draft evaders or deserters who have sorted out their affairs through these offices.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

135. Draft evasion has no consequences for family members of draft evaders. None of the families of draft evaders, whom the source knows of, have faced any issue with the GoS as a consequence of the evasion of a family member. Some of those evaders are residing in Lebanon or in Western countries.

136. The source has not heard of family members of deserters facing issues with the GoS within the last few years solely because of the desertion of their family member. The source has not heard of such cases most likely because a majority of deserters have protected their families by sending them to safe places outside government-controlled areas before deserting.

Skype meeting with Jomah Alqasem, based in Gaziantep, 12 February 2020

Jomah Alqasem is Access and Emergency Response Manager in WATAN Foundation which is based in Gaziantep in Turkey. He has been closely monitoring different issues regarding the Syrian conflict since 2011. Through his work in WATAN, he travels to North Syria regularly.

On WATAN's website www.watan.org.uk, it reads that WATAN is "a (...) Civil Society Organisation delivering emergency relief, third sector support and long-term international development projects [...]."²⁸⁰

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

137. The demand for conscripts and reservists has decreased in the last year, as the SAA is now engaged in armed conflict at only one frontline, i.e. Idlib. However, the SAA is still recruiting men in the military service age in government-controlled areas all over Syria. The recruited men are of different religious backgrounds.
138. Since 2011, all young men who have turned 18 have been called up for military service, except for those who have deferred their military service due to studies and those who have been exempted. Men with an age up to 40, who have served as conscripts before the conflict, have been called up for reserve duty.
139. Of the conscripts who have been serving since 2011, only five percent are still serving in the SAA today. Most of them have either died or deserted.
140. The SAA has not been recruiting in the Kurdish areas it controls. When the SAA's presence in the Kurdish areas increased recently, the SDF wanted to be integrated into the SAA. However, the SAA refused this because the SDF had conditions that the GoS could not accept: to create a separate legion in the SAA for Kurdish recruits only, to have Kurds in high military positions in the SAA and to include Kurdish as a second language in the army.
141. Only few people from Hasakah and Qamishli went to Damascus to voluntarily join the SAA.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

142. Throughout the conflict, recruited reservists and conscripts from pro-government and former opposition-controlled areas have been sent to undergo 20 days of military training. Most of them, regardless of their religious background, have then been sent to fight at the frontlines.
143. The SAA has recruited intensively from the reconciled areas of 2018 such as Daraa, East Ghouta and North Homs. A vast number of these men, conscripts and reservists, have also been sent to the frontline in Idlib.
144. Syrian men who have studied Russian or Farsi have been very demanded at the frontline. They have the essential qualification to facilitate the coordination and communication between the SAA and its Iranian and Russian allies.
145. Medics and journalists are also two groups that have been in demand at the frontline throughout the conflict. Part of the ongoing war in Syria is a media war, which is why the GoS and its allied forces are very interested in presenting their image of the Syrian conflict (the stereotypical portrait of the secular

²⁸⁰ Website of WATAN Foundation, *About Us*, [url](#)

Assad government fighting terrorism). The GoS has thus spent a lot of resources on human capital specialised in media as well as in healthcare.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

146. The SAA has only discharged Class 101 from its ranks in 2019.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

147. Searching for conscripts at their houses occurs in all government controlled areas of Syria.

Recruitment also takes place at checkpoints.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

148. To the source's knowledge, the SAA has not been recruiting men under the age of 18 and men over 42 throughout conflict. Reservists are recruited until the age of 40.

149. Pro-government militias recruit men under the age of 18.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

150. The source assumes that men who are only sons of their families, and who do not fulfil the requirement for obtaining a deferral, for instance due to studies, may be taken to military service.

However, the source has not heard of cases where only sons have been taken to military service.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

151. Desertion from military service is still taking place. *When sending the minutes to the source asking for his approval of it and further comments, the source informed that the case in the following link, reported by Orient News, [url](#), was one incident where defectors were sentenced to death in August 2019.*

Skype meeting with Rami, based in Germany, 12 February 2020

Rami is a Syrian activist residing in Germany. Previously, he was Programme Manager at a political German foundation in Beirut. Currently, he is finalising his Master's degree in human rights.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

152. Presently, the GoS controls almost all of Syria except Idlib. The SAA is currently recruiting conscripts but not to the same extent as before. Previously, there were periods in which the SAA searched much more actively for conscripts, e.g. at checkpoints, in the streets and even in universities.

153. The SAA has taken many areas throughout the past two-three years, e.g. areas around Damascus and Daraa, and has recruited men from these areas through reconciliation agreements (arabisk: *musalaha*, مصالحة). Some people chose to be evacuated to Idlib, others, including groups from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), reconciled and joined the SAA. As a part of the agreement, these groups were allowed to

keep their arms and checkpoints and work as a militia but under the umbrella of the SAA. Some joined voluntarily, whereas others did not have a choice. The SAA has regained most areas that were previously out of its control. The source thus assumes that the SAA has not had a great need for manpower since it recruited through the reconciliation agreements in 2018.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

154. The source emphasises that it is difficult to find information on whether the newly recruited youth, e.g. from Latakia or Tartous, get deployed to the front. The source does not know of examples where conscripts have been sent to the front. The source assumes that it is more advantageous for the GoS to send men who are more trained to the frontline than newly recruited soldiers, considering the few number of frontlines left. However, conscripts from reconciled areas might get sent to the front.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

155. The last discharge happened in 2019 when two groups of soldiers, respectively Class 102 and 103, got discharged after having served since 2010. This included non-commissioned officer, first sergeants, and sergeants. The source assumes that very few among these were still alive (or had not deserted) to be discharged after having served for nine years.

156. Class 248 or 249 consisting of officers were likewise discharged around 2019 after having served since 2012. Most of the discharged soldiers were reservists.

157. Currently there are rumours that Class 104 will be discharged. The source is expecting that more will get discharged, because the SAA is currently not in need of soldiers to the same extent as before.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

158. In addition to the recruitment at checkpoints, through campaigns, house arrests and raids, intensive recruitment mainly took place in the recaptured areas or in former besieged areas in 2015/2016 and until 2018. The source knows of cases from Aleppo, after the GoS had recaptured the area, where people were put in huge camps until they reconciled with the GoS and were sent to military training camps.

159. Recruitment also takes place at the borders. Officers at checkpoints and at the border have access to a centralised database containing the names of those wanted for military service. Young men, who are e.g. in Lebanon, can pay bribes to check from Lebanon whether their names are registered in this database.

160. Previously, the GoS would take men wanted for military service straight from the border to military service, whereas now they are more lenient giving those wanted for military service seven or 15 days to come back home and prepare themselves to join the army.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

161. The SAA is not recruiting men under 18. The source has never heard of such cases. There are procedures that the SAA has been following since before the war.

162. Pro-government militias, the FSA and the PYD recruit men under 18. Only the PYD actually force Kurds under the age of 18 to join them. However, the PYD does not systematically recruit minors.
163. Young people under 18 join pro-government militias voluntarily, because they know that they otherwise will be conscripted to the SAA. But the deteriorating economic situation is also pressing many of those young men to join the militias as they are in need of a source of income. The source knows a person from Homs who joined a pro-government militia because he was about to turn 18, and he thus chose the militia over the SAA in the expectation of a higher salary. He also expected that he would likely serve in his home area rather than being sent to the front.
164. The source has not heard of cases of men over 42 currently being recruited by the GoS, and he finds it very doubtful that the GoS would do that today, although it may have happened in the past.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

165. The source does not know of cases where the GoS did not respect the exemption of the only son of a family from military service. However, he mentions a case of a person who faced difficulties in proving that he was the only son of his family as a consequence of his brother's death. He had to go through a complicated process to prove the death of his brother, but in the end, the person succeeded and was exempted.
166. The source has no information on whether people are being exempted for medical reasons.
167. The source has seen videos showing injured people being conscripted. During the battle of Aleppo in 2016, even if a person was badly injured, he still had to serve. The source mentions one case in which the authorities were searching for a person who was shot in his leg which affected his ability to move. This person was caught and sent back to the frontline in Aleppo.

Implementation of the exemption fee

168. The source does not know of cases where a returnee from abroad has been arrested and taken to military service in spite of having paid the exemption fee. The authorities are respecting the rules allowing Syrian men abroad to be exempted by paying the exemption fee and such persons have not been taken to military service upon return to Syria. The source knows many Syrian NGO workers, who had fled to Lebanon, and who paid the exemption fee and returned to Syria. They paid the fee at the Syrian embassy in Lebanon and were exempted. They did not pay additional fees or bribes, and they are now working inside Syria.
169. Previously, when a person had paid the exemption fee, it used to be marked in the yellow/orange military book, and the authorities would then remove this person's name from the list of wanted persons. However, if a person was also wanted for something else, e.g. for being active for the Syrian opposition in Lebanon (which the person might not know of), he would still be wanted by the GoS despite having paid the exemption fee. The source does not know whether the exemption through the exemption fee is marked in the military book today or in a separate document.

170. If a person in the military service age is also wanted by the authorities for activism against the GoS, he would have to sort out his affairs by for instance paying bribes first in order to be able to pay the exemption fee and be exempted from military service. However, bribes cannot be used if a person is wanted for charges of terrorism.
171. The two requirements of the exemption fee procedure are: residence of at least four consecutive years abroad and a fee of a specific amount of money. Illegal stay abroad is not counted as an obstacle by the GoS for people who want to pay the exemption fee.
172. A draft evader who has stayed abroad can pay the exemption fee as long as he meets the requirements of the exemption fee procedure, e.g. having stayed outside Syria for at least four years. If a person has stayed less than four years outside Syria, he will not be allowed to pay the exemption fee and be exempted. He would thus be drafted upon return.
173. It is not among the requirements for paying the exemption fee that a person has to defer (postpone) his service every year. The source knows of men who did not postpone their military service every year at a Syrian representation abroad and were nevertheless allowed to pay the exemption fee and were exempted.
174. A reservist is not eligible for paying the exemption fee and the source does not know of any official procedures through which a reservist can be exempted. The source assumes that reservists are not allowed to pay the exemption fee because they are of much greater use to the GoS due to their previous experience from the military compared to new conscripts.
175. The source finds it dangerous to return to Syria on the basis of a decree allowing men in the military service age to pay a three month visit to Syria. According to the source, even persons, who have already served, may risk being wanted for reserve duty without themselves knowing of it.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

176. Currently, if draft evaders and deserters are caught, they will be sent to military training (if they have not completed it before fleeing) and then they will be sent to military service. The authorities are thus more lenient now and would not put an evader or deserter in prison, unless he was also wanted for other reasons.
177. In the past, the GoS would execute deserters, but today, deserters are more tolerated because the GoS is aware that many of those who desert today do not necessarily do so for political reasons (but because they are afraid to die). This change in practice towards deserters has happened over time.
178. The source has no information on what would happen to a deserter if he returned to Syria from abroad. However, the source mentions that in the Syrian military penal code, a distinction is made between deserters who left Syria and deserters who stayed inside the country. A deserter fleeing Syria

is considered by the law to inflict more harm on the country than a person who stays inside Syria. This distinction existed even before the war.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

179. The source does not know any person who has availed himself of the amnesties issued with regards to the military service. The source assumes that there are cases where the Syrian authorities have implemented the amnesties, but also cases where the authorities have not respected these. However, today, the GoS respects the amnesties more than previously.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

180. Presently, draft evasion and desertion rarely entails consequences for family members. Earlier in the conflict, the whole family would be persecuted, but in the course of time, the GoS has become more lenient because the GoS is in a better position now than before. In addition, there is a large number of evaders and deserters and every family in Syria has a family member who has evaded or deserted. The GoS has thus not the capacity or the will to punish so many individuals.

Meeting with Mohammad Sarmini, Jusoor for Studies, 18 February 2020, Istanbul

On the website of Jusoor for Studies, one reads:

“Jusoor for Studies is an independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general. We aim to build bridges with officials and decision makers in various state fields and developing sectors to help them make balanced decisions related to regional issues by providing them with accurate, detailed and professional data and reports.” ([url](#))

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

181. The GoS has recruited conscripts and reservists from both pro-government and former opposition-controlled areas. In the cities and suburbs that the GoS has re-captured in 2018, the conscription has been in high numbers due to the availability of manpower in those areas that the government did not have access to earlier.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

182. Conscripts and reservists from all areas in Syria have been deployed to the frontlines especially the frontlines with armed opposition groups. The SAA is in need of soldiers, which is why newly conscripted young males are being sent to the frontlines, even after less than one month of military training.

183. Through monitoring the SAA's casualties, the source estimated that more than 90% of the soldiers at the frontlines are among the newly conscripted men, and a majority of the SAA soldiers at the frontlines are from pro-government areas such as Latakia and Tartous governorates.
184. Conscripts and reservists who refuse to fight in Idlib will be pressured and threatened with imprisonment. Those who keep refusing may be imprisoned. The source assumes that this is because the GoS has concerns that these conscripts and reservists may try to defect from the army when they are at the frontline.
185. The Russian forces have started recruitment campaigns targeting young and experienced Syrian soldiers and fighters, who supposedly will be sent to fight in Libya. The recruitment is voluntary and has mainly taken place in Salamiya town in Hama countryside and in Suweida governorate as well. However, males, who have not completed their military service in the SAA, have not been recruited by the Russian forces.
186. The SAA does not recruit conscripts or reservists in the Kurdish areas it controls.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

187. Two years ago the SAA stated that it would discharge some of the reservists who spent too many years in the military service. However, some officers were discharged but no soldier was discharged because the SAA has always been in need of soldiers in its ranks.
188. In connection with the Idlib battle, Russia and Iran has emphasized to the GoS that it has to provide a sufficient number of Syrian soldiers. Russia and Iran are not ready to lose more individuals in Syria and therefore, they support the SAA by conducting airstrikes and providing specialist warfare advisors. For that reason, the source assumes that the SAA will not discharge any soldier as long as the SAA is fighting at the Idlib frontline.

Prevalence of conscription of males under 18 and above 42

189. There was no case of SAA conscripting males under the age of 18 or above 42 years since 2016. However, some reservists who have exceeded the age of 42 are still conducting their military service within the SAA.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

190. Males who are only sons of their families are being exempted from military service. The source has not heard of cases where only sons have been conscripted.
191. In practice, people who are not able to handle a weapon because of medical conditions, disabilities or major injuries will be exempted. In some cases, people with disabilities have paid bribes to be exempted.

Implementation of the exemption fee

192. Males, including draft evaders, who pay the exemption fee, will have their names removed from lists of wanted people for military service. The source has not heard of cases of people who have been taken to military service despite having paid the exemption fee. The source knows people who have paid the exemption fee and returned to Syria without facing any issues.
193. The GoS needs currency, and therefore, in the last few years, it has facilitated the procedure of paying the exemption fee in order to encourage people to make use of this option.
194. A man can apply for paying the exemption fee at any Syrian embassy or consulate. The exemption fee procedure takes less than a month. He will need to send several documents together with his application. He can authorise a lawyer in Syria to provide the documents that he is not in possession of. After he has applied for paying the exemption fee and has handed in all the required documents, he will receive an approval from the Syrian authorities in Damascus that he can pay the fee to be exempted. To the source's knowledge, the exemption from military service will be marked in a separate document and not in the military book.
195. There is no law stipulating that men residing in Syria can pay a fee to be exempted. However, currently, many men residing in Syria are paying the exemption fee through an illegal procedure where residence information of the applicants is manipulated so that the individual's place of residence is changed to be outside Syria. By doing this, the main condition for paying the exemption fee officially appears to be met.
196. There is no law stipulating that reservists can pay a fee to be exempted.
197. In order to encourage Syrians abroad to visit Syria, the GoS has allowed Syrian men in the military age a three months visit to Syria with a guarantee that they will not be taken to military service in the period they are visiting the country. The source knows many men in different ages that have made use of this option. They applied for the visit at a Syrian diplomatic representation and went back to visit their families for a period of time. They did not experience any issues with regard to military service. To the source's knowledge, however, this option is not available for deserters and draft evaders.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

198. In practice, deserters will be imprisoned or executed upon return to Syria unless they sort out their affairs before the return. The source knows a few cases of deserters who sorted out their affairs with the GoS and were able to return to Syria without receiving any punishment.
199. In practice, draft evaders will risk imprisonment upon return to Syrian, as a consequence of their evasion if they do not pay the exemption fee. The source knows of cases of evaders who did not pay the exemption fee, and who were arrested upon return to Syria from Lebanon.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

200. In the beginning of the Syrian conflict, family members of deserters were arrested in order to put pressure on the deserters to turn themselves in. However, as the number of deserters and defectors increased during the first years of the Syrian conflict, the GoS stopped arresting family members of deserters unless the deserters were generals. To the source's knowledge, during the last couple of years, the families of deserters who have stayed in Syria have not faced any problems as a consequence of the desertion of their family member.
201. People, who fled Syria together with a family member who deserted or evaded will not, as a consequence of fleeing with the deserter or evader, face any problems with the GoS upon return to Syria. The source knows a lot of families who fled Syria with a deserting or evading family member, and who went back to Syria in the recent years. These families have not faced any problems with the Syrian authorities.

Meeting with Navvar Shaban, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 18 February 2020, Istanbul

Navvar Shaban is an Information Unit Manager and Military Expert at Omran Center for Strategic Studies which is an independent think tank and policy center focusing on Syria. The Information Unit specialises in collecting data to understand Syrian and regional affairs. It also offers support to the Research Unit at Omran Studies by monitoring and archiving news and information received from sources in Syria.

Demand for conscripts/reservists in the ranks of the SAA

202. In connection with the current military operations in Idlib province, there was no new large scale conscription campaign in areas that were under GoS control before 2018. Instead the GoS primarily conscripted men from post-reconciled areas, such as the northern Homs, Daraa and East Ghouta, that the GoS had retaken in 2018, as there was more manpower available in these areas. There was a big shortage of manpower and new conscripts from these areas filled some of the gaps in the ranks of the SAA.
203. Many of the former opposition fighters in Daraa became part of the SAA's 5th Corps, which is supplied, trained and supported by Russia.
204. Pro-government militias, such as the Local Defense Forces (LDF), do not forcibly conscript Syrians. Syrians can only join the LDF voluntarily and after having been vetted and approved by local LDF-units.
205. The SAA currently faces manpower shortages on many of its frontlines including on the frontline in Deir Ezzor.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

206. Former fighters from post-reconciled areas constitute a majority of the conscripted fighters fighting on the frontlines in Idlib province.
207. According to the source, about 30 percent of the SAA soldiers, who have been fighting in Idlib, are former opposition fighters from areas as Daraa and northern Homs province.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

208. Final discharge from the SAA has taken place since the summer of 2018. There is no clear procedure regulating the final discharge of conscripts due to the Syrian conflict.
209. For Syrians currently serving as conscripts in the SAA, there is currently no way of knowing exactly when one will be released from military service. Throughout the Syrian conflict, people who have been serving for a number of years in the SAA have been using their connections within the GoS and/or paying bribes as a method to get released from military service. The source knows of conscripts who have paid a bribe to avoid active duty. It means that they are technically and officially enrolled as conscripts in the SAA but in practice, they avoid military service and stay at home.
210. Conscripts that have been disabled during their military service have also been released.
211. In the first quarter of 2019, the first class was released from military service.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

212. The source knows of cases of Syrian men being taken directly from Damascus International Airport to military service and sent to the front lines in Deir Ezzor without receiving any prior military training to fight the Islamic State. *When sending the minutes to the source asking for his approval of it, the source was requested to inform the delegation about: His source of information about these cases (anecdotal reports, written reports, media outlet); when those cases took place; and whether these men, which were taken directly from Damascus international Airport into military service, were just visiting Syria or returning to Syria for good. The delegation did, however, not receive an answer to these questions with the approved minutes sent by the source.*
213. There is currently no conscription to the SAA in the Kurdish-controlled areas in Northeast Syria, not even in places where the SAA has a presence, e.g. in Hasakah or Qamishli city.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

214. There is no conscription, forced or voluntary, of individuals under the age of 18 into the SAA.
215. Local Defence Force militias (LDF), who are associated with the SAA, have been recruiting individuals under 18 on a voluntary basis.
216. There was recruitment of men over 42 into the SAA until 2017. Currently, there is no forced recruitment of men over 42 into the SAA.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

217. Men who are only male child of their family are still being exempted from military service in Syria even in spite of the current need for manpower in the SAA. The source has not heard that the SAA recruits only sons for military service.
218. If one does not have his military exemption/deferral papers/military book on him when passing a checkpoint, he may risk being conscripted into the SAA. In such cases, he might later be released from military service if he is able to prove that he is in fact the only son of his family.
219. A person with a disability can be exempted from military service, but the source is not aware of the criteria currently used by the Syrian authorities to assess whether or not a specific disability makes an individual eligible for exemption from military service.

Implementation of the exemption fee

220. The GoS still respects the rule of the 8,000 USD exemption fee. The source knows multiple cases of people who have paid the exemption fee from abroad and have returned to Syria without being taken to military service. Individuals, who have paid the exemption fee, have also been able to exit Syria again after a visit. As the GoS does not have full control of all checkpoints, though, the source assumes that men, who have paid the exemption fee, may nonetheless risk being conscripted, but the source has not heard of people who have been conscripted despite having paid the exemption fee.
221. The proof that a person has paid the exemption fee is two stamps in his military book.
222. The source is not aware of any cases in which individuals, who have stayed abroad for less than four years, have succeeded in paying the exemption fee and get exempted. But the source does not rule out the possibility that this could happen if a sufficient bribe was paid to the Syrian authorities.
223. The source is not aware of any cases in which reservists were able to pay fees and thus be exempted from military service. The source has only heard of reservists that were able to bribe themselves out of service at the frontline and instead served in an urban area.
224. The rule that allows men in the military service age to visit Syria for a period of three months without being conscripted is being implemented by the GoS.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

225. Draft evaders who are caught in Syria are sent directly to the frontlines. An evader might, however, be able to avoid being sent to the frontlines if he is well connected to the GoS or the Alawite community, or pays a bribe. In such cases, he will instead be sent to serve in a non-frontline unit or be able to stay at home in his house in spite of being officially enlisted in the SAA. The source knows of cases in which men from Damascus serve in non-frontline units in Damascus as well as cases in which men are officially enlisted in SAA but stay at home and do not serve in active duty.

226. The source knows of cases of reservists who evaded military service in 2016 and who have now returned to government-controlled areas. These reservists have been told by the authorities not to rejoin the SAA until the GoS calls them up in the future.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

227. The GoS has respected the amnesties regarding draft evaders and deserters, and they are not being punished for their evasion and desertion as a result of the amnesties. However, they still have to return directly to military service in the SAA.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

228. There are no consequences for families of draft evaders in Syria.

229. The source knows cases where brothers of evaders have been arrested as a consequence of the evaders' active fighting against the GoS. In one case, a father had to sell his house to pay a bribe because the GoS knew that his son was active in an Islamist rebel group.

230. The source is aware of a case in which the father of a deserter was taken to a security branch and asked about his son's activities. This was because the son was profiled and had participated in international/UN-meetings abroad.

Meeting with Asaad Hanna, 18 February 2020, Istanbul

Asaad Hanna is a Syrian journalist and researcher. Asaad has recently been awarded a fellowship by Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs, where he will do a Master's degree in international security policy. He has worked closely with the Syrian opposition and covered the daily news for a period of six years. He has also worked for three years with the White Helmets' leadership. His sources of information are people residing in Syria, especially in areas controlled by the GoS, personal contacts and from media outlets.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

231. Recruitment to the SAA has increased throughout the past two years as a result of the GoS having recaptured many cities (e.g. Ghouta, Daraa, Homs countryside, Aleppo city, Aleppo countryside, Hama countryside), thus having a larger population to recruit from than before. There were many people in these areas; e.g. in Douma in East Ghouta, Rural Damascus, there were 400,000 people.

232. The GoS has not reintroduced compulsory military service in the northeastern Kurdish areas of Syria because the GoS does not have sufficient control over these areas.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

233. Conscripts from recaptured areas have been sent to the frontline to fight. This is visible from the casualty numbers: more and more of the people dying at the front are from e.g. Douma and Ghouta, and they are very young, e.g. 19-25 years old. The source has this information from factions on the

ground that provide him with information about the corpses, they find, and about the people, they arrest. Men from pro-government areas have also been deployed to the frontline. A person's religion or sect does not have an impact on whether he is deployed to the front. The GoS has been sending everyone to the frontline regardless of their age and fighting experience.

234. A new trend, however, is that the GoS is currently sending SAA soldiers from Hama, for example, to fight in Hama. The source assumes that this was too risky a couple of years ago, in terms of people possibly deserting when they were in their home area, but now, nobody wants to join the opposition, who has lost almost all of its territories.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

235. About a year and a half ago, two groups of conscripts, who were supposed to finish their military service in 2011, got discharged. However, in each of these groups, only few persons were still alive.

236. Besides these two groups, only severely injured people have been discharged.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

237. The methods of recruitment have not changed; the methods are the same as one year ago, i.e. house visits, arrests at checkpoints and government institutions etc. They conduct house visits as the regular way to inform the persons that they are enlisted for military service. Men, who do not join the army, will have their names distributed to checkpoints, where they will be arrested and drafted to the army if caught.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

238. The SAA has not been recruiting men under the age of 18 or over the age of 42.

239. Militias, however, have been recruiting men under the age of 18 and over 42. Men have been joining the militias not because they are forced to do so but out of economic need to support their families, or for revenging.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

240. In general, the GoS respects the exemption rule regarding men who are the only sons of their families.

241. However, some only sons join the SAA voluntarily. The source assumes that they join the SAA in order to gain power, social status and/or for economic reasons.

242. It is a special committee, which conducts assessments of people with medical conditions, that decides whether a person is to be exempted.

243. A person with certain physical disabilities, for instance a person with one eye, or mental disabilities, such as insanity, will usually be exempted. A person who is not able to fight is given administrative work as a substitute for regular military service. However, such persons can sometimes pay a bribe to

be allowed to stay at home while the bribed authority makes it look as if the conscript is doing his military service in the office.

Implementation of the exemption fee

244. A person who has stayed abroad for four consecutive years can apply for and pay the exemption fee (*badal*). He will have to go through a security check in the process of sorting out his possible outstanding issues with the GoS, which takes place at a Syrian embassy or consulate. He will also have to fill in papers on how and why he left Syria, and where he exited from.
245. The GoS is in need of currency. It is therefore interested in having as many Syrian men as possible avail themselves of the possibility to be exempted by paying the exemption fee. Therefore, even a person who has served for the FSA would be able to go through this process and be exempted if the fee was paid.
246. The source knows of several cases where people who were against the GoS were allowed to pay the exemption fee and were issued new passports. Some of these did not want to return to Syria but paid the exemption fee solely to acquire passports that are valid for six years.
247. In two cases, though, which the source has heard about from their families, two men returned from Lebanon to Syria and were arrested at the border and recruited to the SAA in spite of having paid the exemption fee. The money was paid at an embassy abroad. They paid the fees and one month later, they went to Syria. These two cases took place within the last year. The source does not know the particulars of these two cases, including where these men were originally from in Syria or the reason for their arrest.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

248. If an evader is caught by the authorities today, he will simply be conscripted to the SAA. The source knows many people in Damascus and Homs who stay in their homes to hide from the authorities and avoid being conscripted.
249. Few years ago, men who deserted from the SAA risked being executed. The source does not know what the punishment for desertion is be today, because he has not heard of people deserting within the last year or two.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

250. The source characterises the amnesties for evaders and deserters as a trap and propaganda from the side of the GoS, and he states that the GoS has not respected the amnesties.
251. The source has heard of deserters from Latakia countryside who made use of the amnesty but were nonetheless arrested and imprisoned for a few months. They were then sent to military service.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

252. The source has not heard of recent cases where the evasion of a family member has had consequences for the rest of the family. Whether the family of a person who defected would presently face consequences depends on a number of factors, e.g. who the family is, which intelligence branch is responsible for the area in which the family lives, what the religion of the family is etc. The source has heard that the GoS threatens families of deserters, and that the authorities come to their home to investigate them. However, the practice of arresting family members of deserters in order to deter others from deserting (which was widely used in the beginning of the conflict, i.e. in 2011 and 2012), is no longer applied.
253. The source does not find it likely that the family of a deserter, who deserted four years ago, would face consequences from the authorities upon return to Syria. However, the family might be investigated; e.g., the security services may invite the family to come in for questioning, or they may come to the family's home.

Meeting with Suhail Al-Ghazi, 19 February 2020, Istanbul

Suhail Al-Ghazi is an independent researcher who cooperates with different research institutions. He mainly conducts research on conflict-related issues such as militarisation. He is also a co-founder of Verify-Sy and the Syrian Context Newsletter, where he, among others, writes on IDP's and refugees.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

254. Recruitment to the SAA has been stable within the past year. The SAA still recruits every young man who turns 18 except for those who are exempted by the military service law. The attack on Idlib is a full scale military operation with three frontlines which demand a lot of manpower.
255. Since 2018, the SAA has not called up reservists from pro-government areas as it did in the previous years. However, the SAA has recruited a large number of reservists from former opposition-controlled areas. The percentage of reservists from former opposition-controlled areas, who were sent to the frontlines, is low compared to soldiers from pro-government areas.
256. From the beginning of the conflict, the purpose of recruiting reservists has been to keep men in the military age under the surveillance of the GoS in order to avoid that they join the opposition.
257. Following the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 in Syria, the GoS has for the first time suspended conscription for eligible men until April 22 2020. This means that young men will not be taken to conscription until late April. However, conscripted soldiers will not be demobilized.
258. Despite its increasing presence in the Kurdish areas, the SAA's influence is still limited there. The majority of the locals residing in the small areas, which the SAA controls in Hasakah and Qamishli, are pro-government so they voluntarily apply to join the army. Recruitment to the SAA in these areas

merely takes place on a voluntary basis. Men, who do not want to be recruited, are able to avoid it just by staying and moving outside of the areas that the SAA controls. This is possible because the GoS police and the military police are of limited number and are not able to conduct home searches and arrests of evaders and deserters through checkpoints. In addition, the GoS is also very careful not to anger the locals, which is why it does not recruit by force.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

259. The SAA, Iranian-backed militias and Russian-backed militias are fighting on a frontline that stretches eighty kilometres from Aleppo countryside to Idlib and northern Hama.
260. On the basis of information on the SAA's casualties, the source assesses that the SAA mainly deploys those who were conscripted in the first years of the Syrian conflict. These are the most experienced fighters and they are deployed with the armoured military divisions, e.g. the 11th-division, 91st brigade and 23rd armoured tank brigade.
261. The SAA's frontline casualties are typically people from pro-government areas. Most of the casualties are in their late twenties and their military ranks indicate that they have been in the army for years.
262. The source rejects that the government's choice of who to send to the frontline is dependent on sect, area of residence or education. He assesses that it is rather dependent on warfare experience.
263. New conscripts only get military tasks after undergoing six months military training. The source has not heard of conscripts who have not undergone six months military training. Based on the information that the source has received from sources in Syria, he assesses that the SAA has sent conscripts to the frontline who have been at least one year in military service.
264. The source mentions one case in which a Syrian man with refugee status in Germany was detained and conscripted to the SAA upon return to Syria in 2018. He was found killed on the frontline in Idlib province in January 2020. The youngest casualty in the ranks of the SAA, whom the source has information about, was born in 1994.
265. Conscripts from reconciled areas were recruited to the SAA, whereas some former opposition fighters joined either Iranian-backed militias, the fourth armoured division or Russian-backed militias. Some Iranian- and Russian-backed militias are currently fighting at the frontline in Idlib.
266. Men, who completed their military service in the years before the Syrian conflict began, and were recruited as reservists throughout the conflict, have not been sent to fight at the frontlines. Since 2012, reservists have been recruited for a few months and then demobilized.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

267. Class 102, which was conscripted in 2009, was discharged in May 2018, and Class 103, which was conscripted in 2010, was discharged in December 2018 after numerous demands made by soldiers from these classes. Men who were disabled during the conflict have been discharged. Reservists serving in the infantry and logistics have been discharged continuously since 2012. However, reservists

serving in armoured divisions are likely to be kept in active reserve duty for one to two years. Most of the reservists recruited from former opposition-controlled areas were demobilized after a couple of months. The source's information about reservists stems from interviews with former reservists.

268. On 29 March 2020, the Syrian Ministry of Defense issued a decree demobilizing reserve service soldiers and officers as well as draftees who have been serving in the army since 2013. This decision is demobilizing officers (between Captain and Colonel General), who served for more than 3 years as reservists, as well as non-commissioned officers (between Warrant officer and Corporal) and foot soldiers, who served more than 7 years as reservists, as well as conscripts who weren't demobilized after finishing their conscription period.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

269. Conscription takes place mostly at checkpoints, universities and at state institutions, where young men typically encounter the Syrian authorities.

270. In former opposition-controlled areas, such as areas in Rural Damascus, the SAA sends lists of wanted people for conscription to the police in the area. These lists are put up in state institutions and given to officers at checkpoints.

271. Through local councils in Rural Damascus, military service notifications are delivered to persons who are called up for military service. As the number of residents living in the province has decreased significantly during the conflict, it is now possible for the Syrian authorities to conduct house raids and arrests.

272. In Damascus City, many young men succeed in evading the military service. To avoid conscription a person would need to avoid checkpoints. The SAA does not conduct house arrests in this province. The source knows of three young men who have been living in Damascus throughout the four years that they have been evading conscription. It is possible for them to go to work and return back home as long as they avoid going through checkpoints, being out at night or passing by a police station.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

273. The SAA has not recruited men under 18 at any time during the conflict. Since the beginning of 2018, the SAA has not recruited men over 42, and since the beginning of 2019, no reservists over 38 have been recruited.

274. However, many pro-government militias (Russian-backed or Iranian-backed) have recruited child soldiers under the age of 18. Between 2015 and 2019, some of these militias merged into the SAA, mainly in the 4th Corps or the 5th Corps.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

275. The SAA does not conscript men who are only sons of their families. The source has not heard of cases where an only son has been conscripted to the SAA.

276. In practice, short-sighted men are usually given administrative tasks in the SAA. Physically handicapped persons who for instance are missing a limb or an eye are also exempted from military service.
277. The source has not heard of cases of people taken to military service despite having paid the exemption fee of 8,000 USD. To the source's knowledge, the Syrian authorities respect the law exempting men who have paid the fee.
278. Before 2018, a man who wanted to pay the exemption fee would have the option of either going to Syria and pay the fee or having a family member or a middleman pay the fee on his behalf. It was then not possible to pay the fee at a Syrian diplomatic representation abroad. The source knows of three cases from that time where young Syrian men, who wanted to be exempted, were deceived by some middlemen who took their money and forged their exemption fee documents. Two of these conscripts were taken to military service upon return to Syria. However, one of them managed to pay the exemption fee once more and thus avoided military service.
279. An individual, who returns to Syria a few days after having paid the exemption fee, risks facing problems upon return as the authorities may not have had sufficient time to clear his name from wanted lists for military service or wanted lists for other outstanding issues. In such cases, it would be better, according to the source, to go to the military police upon return and to make sure that one's name has been cleared. Additionally, it could be better to wait at least two months before returning to Syria, so that the Military Police has enough time to remove this person's name from wanted lists.
280. As a part of the procedure to pay the exemption fee, a person has to apply for the so-called sorting out his affairs [*taswiyat al-wada*]. With this application, the authorities will make an inquiry on whether the person has any outstanding issues. In most cases, the authorities will approve the clearance and delete the person's name from wanted lists if the name is on these lists. People wanted for security issues, however, such as fighting against the GoS, will hardly get their names cleared.
281. There is no law that makes it possible for reservists to pay a fee to be exempted.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

282. In practice, the consequence of desertion depends on the reason for deserting. The punishment for desertion ranges from few years of imprisonment to execution. Previously, it was not possible for individuals who had dodged the draft to go to state institutions and hospitals for fear of being revealed and arrested. The Syrian government has now said that these individuals will not be arrested if they go to the hospital.
283. In practice, the consequence for evading is up to three months imprisonment (decided by a military court) followed by military service. If the evader is from a pro-government area, it is unlikely that he would get imprisoned. Instead, he would be sent directly to military service.
284. A person who reaches the age of 42 and has not served in the military yet will, according to an amendment to the military service law in December 2019, have to pay a fee or his property will be

confiscated and sold by the Syrian authorities. In case the person's funds are insufficient to cover the fee, a reserve seizure remains on the funds belonging to the assigned person's wife and children.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

285. Some evaders have made use of the amnesties issued by the president. These were told to go to a local conscription directorate within three months after the amnesty was issued in order to be conscripted without facing a penalty (which is usually a prison sentence between three to six months in a military prison). These men went into the military training courses for six months and were later transferred to other military bases and facilities just like normal conscripts.
286. The deserters did not make use of the amnesties issued by the president as the amnesties did not cover them.
287. Deserters and defectors in former opposition-held areas, such as the northern countryside of Homs, East Ghouta, east of Qalamoun and Daraa province, were supposed to be granted amnesty through the reconciliation deals they had signed with the GoS. However, many of the deserters and defectors were called up by the security sector after the opposition forces left to Idlib. Many of them ended up in detention centres or died in detention.
288. On 22 of March, the GoS issued a decree that gave amnesty to persons who had committed crimes and felonies before 22 March 2020. This amnesty decree also covered draft evaders.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion for family members

289. As a consequence of a person's evasion, his family members would likely have their house searched several times by the military police.
290. The source does not know of cases of families of evaders who have returned to Syria and faced problems with the Syrian authorities solely because of the evasion of their family member.
291. As a consequence of a person's desertion or defection, his family members, including parents, sisters and brothers, might be harassed, arrested and detained by the security police. In case of defection, the extended family, including cousins, may also face harassment, arrest and detention.
292. Family members being arrested by the Syrian government are subjected to the same consequences as other detainees, including sexual violence, torture, or/and in most of cases enforced disappearance.
293. The extent of how frequent such practice is, depend on two major factors: The area where they were living (if it is under the government's control or not) and on whether the defector/deserter was a high rank officer or just an infantry/low rank soldier. If family members live under the government's control or are travelling and/or returning to Syria, they will most likely be immediately arrested by the GoS. This practice is also implemented in areas that are recaptured by the government in the same widespread and systematic manner. The government mostly targets family members of people holding a high rank in the SAA rather than families of low-level soldiers.

294. The source knows cases of families of defectors who were arrested upon return to Syria from Lebanon solely because a person from their family defected from military service. The source mentions a case of a person who had defected and had joined rebels in Zabadani before he went to Qalamoun. His family, including his father, mother and two sisters, knew nothing about him. The family returned from Egypt to their hometown Zabadani town in Damascus countryside in June 2019 after the father had checked that his name was not on any wanted list. One day, armed men from the pro-government militia NDF came to the family's house and arrested the father. However, the rest of the family did not face any consequences. The family did not know where the father was for two months until they were told that he was detained in a facility of the Air Force Intelligence. The father was released in October 2019 after his family paid a huge bribe.

Meeting with a western diplomat working on Syria, 21 February 2020, Beirut

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

295. The demand for conscripts and reservists has remained high. Since December 2018, the recruitment has even increased, primarily due to two factors. The first factor is that some groups of soldiers have been discharged after having served for a long time, and these soldiers need to be replaced. The second factor is the ongoing offensive in Idlib, in which the SAA itself has proven to be quite incapable and reliant on support of militias. The SAA relies heavily on new recruits coming in, and the offensive in Idlib has been successful mainly because of the air support from the Russians and the support from Iranian-linked militias.

296. To the source's knowledge, the SAA does not conscript Kurds at the few checkpoints that the SAA has in the northeastern Kurdish areas of Syria. However, the intelligence services (Arabic: *mukhabarat*, مخابرات) are trying to convince Arab tribes in these areas through positive and negative incentives to leave the SDF and join either the SAA, pro-government militias or the intelligence services. There have also been unconfirmed stories of forced conscription of Arabs.

297. A person who has served in the SDF but not in the SAA would immediately be drafted to the SAA once he goes outside of the SDF-controlled areas. This also applies to a person returning from abroad through Damascus airport.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

298. The SAA has been deploying people to the frontline regardless of their background (religion, area, qualifications etc.). Both conscripts and reservists, experienced as well as unexperienced soldiers have been deployed to the front. The SAA is stretched and using whoever they can. The SAA has even been deploying people to the front who have recently fought for the opposition, e.g. from Daraa and East Ghouta.

Final discharge of conscripts and reservists serving in the SAA

299. A significant number of soldiers have been discharged and discharge takes place continuously, in spite of the continued demand for manpower, because the GoS has been facing severe pressures from the families of the soldiers who have been serving for up to eight or nine years. The source has not seen any reports about the discharge announcements not being implemented.
300. In spite of the demand for manpower, the source has not heard that the discharged soldiers have been called up again.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

301. Conscription of men of military service age still takes place at checkpoints and border crossings.
302. The source assumes that the methods of recruitment have not changed within the last year. The only additional method has been an effort by the GoS to recruit men from the Arab communities in Northeast Syria through influencing Arab tribes in these areas. Some Arab tribes in Northeast Syria, who were allied with the SDF, have shifted side to the GoS, and these Arab tribes have therefore integrated their units, which include commanders and soldiers, into government structures (the SAA or pro-government militias).

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

303. The source has not heard that the SAA has been recruiting men under the age of 18 or over the age of 42 within the last year.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

304. It is the source's understanding that the rules regarding exemption of men who are only male child of their families are upheld. He has not heard of cases where only sons have been conscripted. However, some of his sources assess that it cannot be ruled out that this exemption is not respected in former opposition-controlled areas, because motivations for revenge and punishment on the part of individual decision makers there often trump the correct application of military recruitment law.
305. The source does not know whether the exemption for medical reasons is being respected. This exemption is very unspecific making it difficult to know how it is implemented.

Implementation of the exemption fee

306. The source has no information on the implementation of the exemption fee.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

307. According to the source, the consequences of draft evasion and desertion remain unchanged in Syrian military law.
308. In practice, the source assumes that if a draft evader is caught, he would likely be conscripted rather than imprisoned, or he may face a combination of both, because the SAA's need for manpower is likely to outweigh their interest in imprisoning draft evaders in an already overcrowded prison system.

309. The source assumes that the GoS does not only apply the punishment for desertion as required by law but also makes use of other legal stipulations to pursue captured deserters, such as those laid down in the anti-terrorism laws of 2012.
310. It is the source's understanding that generally, defectors will most likely be arrested and punished, possibly killed, that deserters will be arrested and punished or drafted for military service, and that evaders will be drafted to military service.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

311. The source finds it difficult to find information about the implementation of the latest amnesty of September 2019 or the previous amnesties regarding evaders and deserters, firstly, because the lack of access by the UN or any other independent and impartial organisation in Syria makes information collection and reliable monitoring very difficult. Secondly, these amnesties have not led to the return of a large number of former draft evaders and deserters, which makes it difficult to collect information from draft evaders and deserters themselves. According to the source, most potential returnees don't trust the amnesties because they do not offer exemption from being drafted into military service, and they explicitly exclude some crimes, such as those under the anti-terrorism law, but it is precisely these crimes that returnees would fear to be accused of.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders and deserters

312. The source has heard of individual cases within the last year of close family members being physically harassed (mainly by arresting family members) or psychologically harassed, for example by the intelligence services showing up at the family's home several times, asking about the person's whereabouts, delivering draft notifications or arrest warrants, asking family members to report to an intelligence branch which could lead to enforced disappearance.
313. There is no clear and consistent procedure but rather a pattern of measures typically employed by the intelligence branches in exerting pressure on the families of draft evaders and deserters. It depends on the officer in charge, the family, other allegations against the person etc. to what extent these measures are implemented. It is clear to the source from many individual examples, which experts have pointed to, and which has come to the source's knowledge through contacts with families of refugees incl. deserters and draft evaders, that the GoS will go very far to make the family understand that the evading or deserting person has to hand himself in.
314. Based on the cases the source has come into contact with over the past years, the source assumes that the GoS puts pressure on family members of deserters and draft evaders up to the level of mothers, fathers, siblings, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. The source has heard about around 10 cases, the most recent ones taking place within the last year, but underlines at the same time, however, that it is difficult to obtain confirmed information on such cases concerning the work of intelligence agencies.

315. The harassment of families of evaders and deserters is more prevalent in former opposition-controlled areas, such as Ghouta, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Daraa, Quneitra, and parts of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, and less prevalent in loyalist areas, such as Damascus, Latakia and Tartous. Suweida has retained a certain ability to shield evaders from the GoS, which is why many thousands of evaders manage to remain there for now, but local elders and local authorities are under constant pressure by the GoS to hand over these evaders for military service.
316. The source finds it likely that the intelligence services are capable of putting pressure on a large number of families for the evasion or desertion of one of their family members.

Meeting with a humanitarian organisation working in Syria, 21 February 2020, Beirut

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

317. The need for fighters in the SAA has decreased in the last two years as the Idlib Province has been the only remaining frontline. Therefore, recruitment of conscripts and reservists has decreased as well.
318. The SAA has been recruiting conscripts from both pro-government and former opposition-controlled areas. As a part of the reconciliation agreements in areas which the GoS retook in 2018, former opposition fighters have either joined the SAA or pro-government militias. Many of the fighters were also allowed to stay in and defend the reconciled areas and were thus not sent to the frontline.
319. At checkpoints inside Syria, the GoS' focus is on securing that anti-government persons are prevented from conducting attacks. At the checkpoints at the borders, the focus is rather on checking whether people are wanted for military service.
320. The SAA has not been recruiting in the Kurdish areas it is controlling. The source assumes that the GoS wants to avoid what might trigger a conflict with the Kurds.
321. Kurds who have not completed their military service in the SAA will be taken to military service if they enter Syria through territories under government control, unless they fulfil the conditions for exemption stipulated by the Syrian Military Service Law.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

322. Based on information on the identities of both SAA's casualties and soldiers, the source assesses that experienced SAA soldiers, who were fighting at different frontlines, have been taken to the Idlib frontline, after the SAA retook former opposition-controlled areas in 2018. This includes reservists and conscripts who have been serving for years.

323. Throughout the past two years, the source has not heard of any new conscripts killed in battle. The source thus assumes that no new conscripts have been deployed to the frontline. The source assumes that the SAA is currently not in urgent need of people who do not have skills and experience in fighting. However, he knows from Syrians he has spoken to that new conscripts always fear being taken to the frontline as no one knows in which area he would serve.

324. The source has not seen information which indicates that reconciled fighters from former opposition-controlled areas have been sent to the frontline. The source assumes that the GoS most likely has been avoiding giving these fighters an opportunity to defect and join opposition groups in Idlib.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

325. Conscripts who were recruited in the first years of the Syrian conflict were discharged last year.

326. Some people have been discharged due to disabilities or medical conditions that make it impossible for them to fight. Men, who have become the only sons of one or both of their parents because of the death of other brothers, have also been discharged.

327. Palestinian units within the SAA have been discharging men, who were recruited in the military as conscripts, after serving a period of four to five years.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

328. In Damascus, recruitment mainly takes place through the military police that sends notes to men who are turning 18. In former opposition-controlled areas, the military police is not involved in recruiting men for military service as the GoS tries to avoid provoking the locals. Therefore, the recruitment goes through the local *mukhtar* who will deliver the note of military service to the conscript.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

329. To the source's knowledge, men under the age of 18 or over the age of 42 have not been recruited to the military.

330. Pro-government militias do not recruit men under the age of 18. However, men over 42 who want to join voluntarily are recruited by militias.

331. In accordance with an amendment to the Military Service Law in February 2019, people who were born before 1981 have been exempted from reserve duty.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

332. To the source knowledge, men who are only sons of their families have not been recruited to the SAA.

333. However, the source has spoken to only sons from minority groups, including Christians, who have joined the SAA voluntarily. This has not been due to their loyalty to the GoS but rather because they wished to protect their community from what they perceive as the danger of Islamist groups.

Implementation of the exemption fee

334. It is the source's perception that the Syrian authorities have been respecting the exemption fee law. To the source's knowledge, no one has been recruited to the SAA after having paid the exemption fee.
335. The source knows a lot of people who have paid the exemption fee. Some of them are currently residing in Syria while others have been travelling regularly to Syria without facing any difficulty with regards to military service.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

336. Draft evaders, who have handed themselves in or who have been caught, have been imprisoned from two to 14 days in a military prison as a punishment for evading. Afterwards, they have been sent to military service by the recruitment authorities in their area of origin.
337. Deserters who have handed themselves in and who have sorted out their affairs with the GoS [*taswiya*] have been sent to military service as a condition for the *taswiya*. The source has heard of such cases in Daraa and East Ghouta where the deserters, who had joined the opposition during the first years of the conflict, sorted out their affairs with the GoS and were afterwards sent to serve in the military. However, deserters would not be able to sort out their affairs if they had committed crimes such as killings, rapes etc. Instead, they would be brought before the court and punished for their crimes.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

338. Many draft evaders in Syria have realised that they cannot keep avoiding military service by hiding from the authorities, especially after the GoS has regained control over most of Syria. For that reason, many evaders in Syria have handed themselves in and afterwards been sent directly to military service without being punished as promised by the amnesty. The source does not know of specific cases of people who have made use of the latest amnesty issued in September 2019.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

339. The source has not heard of family members of deserters or evaders who have faced an issue with the GoS as a consequence of the desertion or evasion of their family member. From the family members that he has been in contact with through his work in the last few years, the source has not heard that they have faced any problem or harassment by the GoS because of the evasion or desertion of their family member.

E-mail interview with Fadel Abdul Ghany, Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 6 February – 24 March 2020

Fadel Abdul Ghany is Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), which is an independent non-partisan, non-governmental organisation. SNHR was founded in June 2011 and works documenting human rights violations in Syria and defending human rights of Syrians at the

international level. It publishes different kinds of documentation reports via different media outlets, such as its website, traditional and new media outlets, printouts, seminars, meetings and through participating in United Nations' Human Rights Council's sessions. The sources of information of SNHR are, beside secondary sources, also first-hand sources such as survivors and eyewitnesses.

Recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

340. The GoS has opened up the possibility to settle one's situation Hasakah in Northeast Syria to motivate young Kurdish men to enlist in the SAA.

Deployment of conscripts/reservists to the front

341. Conscripts and soldiers are usually Sunnis while officers are, in general, Alawites.

342. Conscripts and mostly well-educated reservists have been deployed to the frontlines. They have been participating continuously in fighting this year and in the last few years as well. At least 75% of all conscripts and reservists that have been recruited for a year or less has been deployed to the frontlines.

343. Conscripts participate in fighting, raids, and in bombing opposition areas to regain control, as well as sweeping areas for mines, transporting ammunitions and guarding the frontlines. It is the personnel of the security branches who guard the areas that the SAA recaptures. Conscripts move on to other areas that the SAA wants to recapture.

344. Deserters and former rebel-fighters, who have settled their security situation with the GoS, are deployed to fight for the SAA in new areas that are under opposition control.

345. A person's area of origin does not have an impact on what area he will be deployed to. However, Suweida, which has a Druze majority population, is an exception. Conscripts from Suweida serve only in Suweida and are not sent to participate in active fighting at the frontlines due to the special arrangement that the governorate has made with the GoS. This does not include persons who live outside of Suweida but who originate from the governorate.

Final discharge of conscripts/reservists serving in the SAA

346. No regular final discharge of conscripts and/or reservists in the SAA has taken place.

Methods of recruitment of conscripts/reservists to the SAA

347. The methods of recruitment do not differ from area to area, however, in the areas that were recaptured in 2019, recruitment is mostly carried out through arrests and raids.

348. Since the beginning of 2018, the GoS has established several recruitment centres for conscription and for volunteering in the SAA in the recaptured areas in Northeast Syria. These centres are similar to the recruitment centres in the other governorates, where young men, who are about to become of military service age, register and sort out their affairs, or postpone their service if they are students. These centres also register those who would like to join the SAA affiliated militias. Persons, who have deserted or evaded military service, can also go to the recruitment centres and sort out their affairs so

that they are no longer wanted by the security forces. In practice, some may be at risk of being punished by the GoS (as mentioned in part about implementation of amnesties).

349. The GoS also has opened up the possibility to settle one's situation in Hasakah to motivate young Kurdish men to enlist in the SAA.

Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42

350. The source has not registered recruitment of anyone under the age of 18 within the official ranks of the SAA.
351. Within the pro-government militias such as the National Defence Forces (NDF), however, recruitment under 18 is widespread. Minors are recruited to these militias with the consent of the GoS. They abuse the circumstances of minors who are affected by poverty and sectarianism and are unable to go to school. The militias also recruit by motivating the children to revenge the death of their relatives.
352. The source has received information from several sources on the case of Mohammad Fares Abdin al-Fares from Aqarab al-Safiya (a town in Salamiya City in the eastern suburbs of Hama governorate), who was forcibly recruited at the age of 16 by his relative who was commander in a pro-government militia. The relative of Mohammad threatened him that he would arrest him if he did not join the militia.
353. Many reservists that are over 42 are serving in the SAA, including men up to 48 years old. Some of these have even been called up after the age of 42. Some are government employees. One example is Haytham Hassan al-Kan, who was a teacher in Talbisa city in Homs governorate northern suburbs. He was arrested by Syrian government forces in early 2019 in Homs and was recruited as a reservist. He was later killed in conflict in the suburbs of Hama governorate on January 13 2020. The source was informed about this case by a relative of Haytham and by some residents of Talbisa.

Implementation of the exemptions for only sons and people with medical conditions

354. Men who were the only sons of their families or who had brothers killed fighting for the SAA have been granted an exemption from military service.

Implementation of the exemption fee

355. There has been consistency in the implementation of the exemption fee. Those who paid the exemption fee were exempted from military service. The source knows of a Syrian expatriate who paid the exemption fee and had his name crossed out of the records for individuals wanted for military service. Upon return to Syrian, he was not recruited.
356. The procedure for paying the exemption fee has been made easy because the GoS benefits from the fees received. The GoS accepts to sort out the affairs of all those who did not provide postponement documents during their stay outside the country. However, additional fines are required to be paid along with the exemption fee.

357. There is no law that stipulated that a reservist can be exempted by paying an exemption fee. However, a reservist can avoid military service by bribing the officer in charge who will register that the reservist is serving.

Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion

358. Usually, an evader who is caught by the authorities will be imprisoned for a few days (for evading) and then, he will be sent to military service, unless he is wanted by the SAA for other offences.

359. A person deserting from the SAA will usually be imprisoned in a security branch prison where the reason for the desertion will be investigated. The person could be tortured and forcibly disappear. The security branch, which is keeping the person, may decide to transfer the person to the military court where he will be sentenced based on the offences that he is accused of.

Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters

360. The amnesty issued in September 2019 has not been implemented. The amnesty stipulated that the fugitive surrenders himself in a specific period to be included in the amnesty, and there is no guarantee that those who surrendered themselves will not be subjected to arrest, torture and death due to torture. The source estimates that the number of those who surrendered themselves after the issuance of the last amnesty did not exceed dozens. People do not trust that the GoS will implement the amnesty, because they have seen that some people who availed themselves to previous similar amnesties were arrested, torture and/or disappeared.

361. Defectors are subjected to more torture and forced disappearance, and they don't benefit from amnesties, as they are being held in security branches with no trials.

362. The source knows of three examples of Syrian defectors, who tried to make use of the amnesties. The three cases are:

- Bashir Al-Kahhal from Douma city in Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus born in 1992. He was a defected soldier. In July 2019, he wanted to make use of the amnesty and therefore, he surrendered to the SAA in order to reenlist for compulsory military service. He was one of the individuals who sorted out his affairs previously. On 21 October 2019, his family was informed that they were to retrieve his body from Harasta Military Hospital in Rural Damascus. There were signs of torture on his body.
- Saeed Ali al-Yatim al-Meqdad was from Busra Al-Sham city east of Daraa governorate and a former player in Busra Al-Sham Football Club. He was a defected conscript who wanted to make use of the amnesty. Therefore, he surrendered to the security forces in 2018 but he was instead arrested. On 24 October 2019, his family learned that he was registered dead in the Civil Registry in 16 September 2019. The source believes that it is highly likely that he died as a consequence of torture in Saydnaya Military Prison in Damascus suburbs.
- Mohammad Samir Hussein had sorted out his affairs before he was arrested by the GoS in September 2019 in his hometown of Misraba in East Ghouta in Damascus. On 3 November

2019, the source received information confirming that Mohammad died as a consequence of torture in one of the detention centres.

Possible consequences for family members of evaders/deserters

363. A person who defects will usually move his family out of government-controlled area before defecting in order to avoid retaliation against the family. After a person has defected, his family members (mainly his immediate family members) become wanted by the GoS, and if they return, they will be arrested and tortured. The family is especially in risk shortly after the defection, and if the defecting family member is a high ranking officer.
364. The source has information that in the last two years, some families of deserters and defectors are still being harassed by being repeatedly called up for interrogation and questioned about the deserter/defector.

Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

Military service in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) after summer 2018 – FFM February 2020

- 1. Current pattern of recruitment of conscripts and reservists to the SAA**
 - 1.1. Demand for conscripts and reservists in the ranks of the SAA
 - 1.2. Methods of recruitment of conscripts and reservist to the SAA
 - 1.3. Duties and tasks of recruited conscripts and reservists, including prevalence of participation in active fighting

- 2. Implementation of the military service law**
 - 2.1. Prevalence of recruitment of men under 18 and over 42
 - 2.2. Implementation of exemptions from military service (only son, medical condition and exemption fee)
 - 2.3. Final discharge of conscripts and reservists serving in the SAA

- 3. Draft evasion and desertion**
 - 3.1. Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion
 - 3.1.1. Implementation of amnesties regarding evaders and deserters
 - 3.2 Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion for family members