

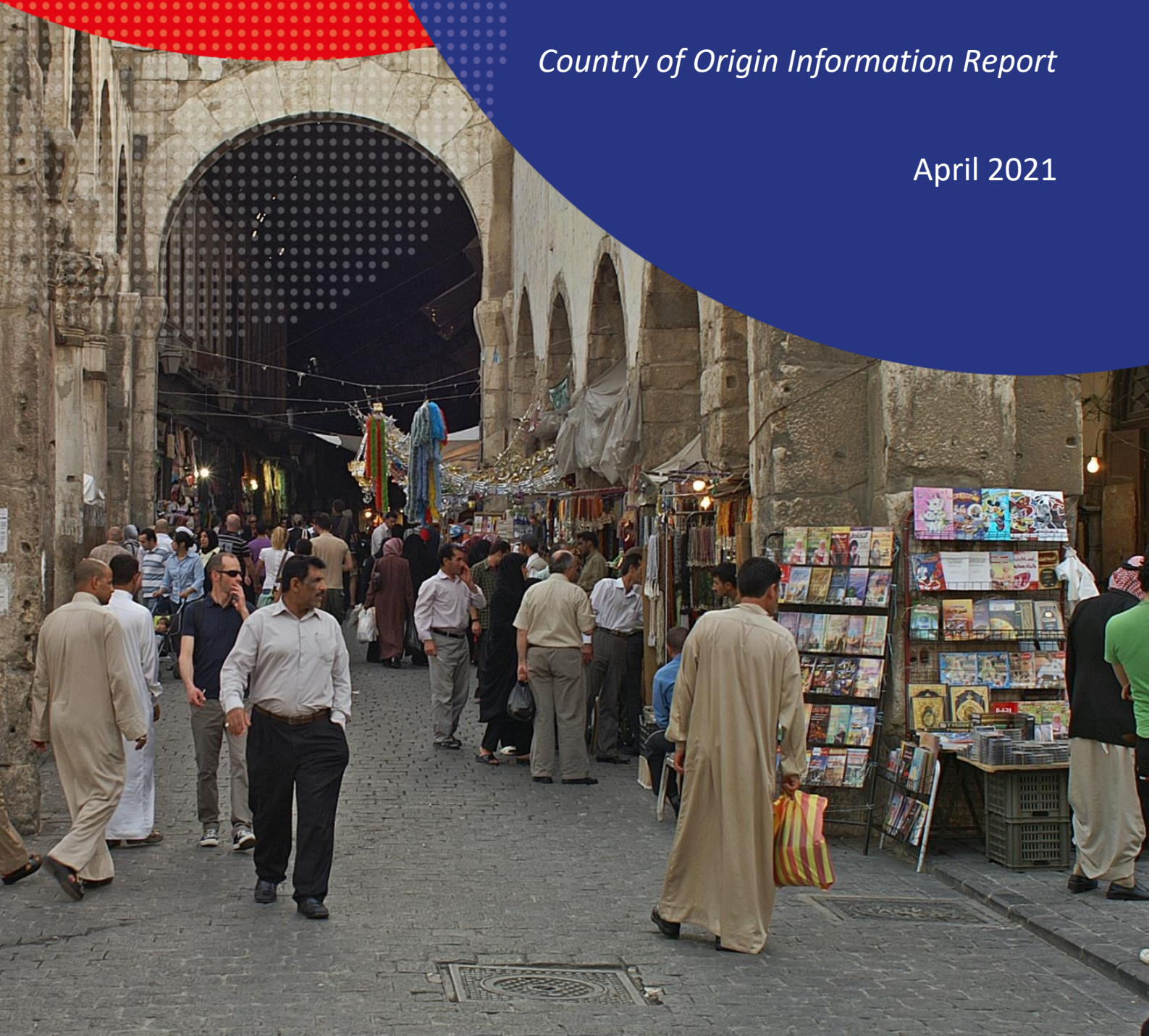


# Syria

## Socio-economic situation: Damascus city

*Country of Origin Information Report*

April 2021





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PDF ISBN: 978-92-9465-083-2 doi: 10.2847/957835 BZ--09-21-115-EN-N

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Shopping people at the entrance of the Big Bazaar in Damascus, Syria.

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# Acknowledgements

This report was drafted by the European Asylum Support Office COI Sector.

Additionally, the Country of Origin Information Department of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum provided research contributions during the drafting phase of this report by sharing with EASO the English translation of its COI Syria Country Report.<sup>1</sup>

The following departments and organisations have reviewed the report:

Austria, Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum, Country of Origin Information Department

France, Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), Information, Documentation and Research Division

The Netherlands, Afdeling Ambtsberichten, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report, but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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<sup>1</sup> Austria, BFA Staatendokumentation [Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum – COI Unit], Country Report on Syria [Updated 22.01.2021], Available from BFA Staatendokumentation

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## Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019).<sup>2</sup> The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular application for international protection. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

'Refugee', 'risk' and similar terminology are used as generic terminology and not in the legal sense as applied in the EU Asylum Acquis, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

The drafting of this report was finalised on 13 April 2021. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this report. More information on the reference period for this report can be found in the methodology section of the [Introduction](#).

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<sup>2</sup> The 2019 EASO COI Report Methodology can be downloaded from the EASO COI Portal [url](#)

## Glossary and abbreviations

Al-Yarmouk camp	Main refugee camp for Palestinians; located in Damascus
DAM	International airport code for Damascus International Airport
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
GoS	Government of Syria
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MoH	Syrian Ministry of Health
PHC	Primary Healthcare Centre
SYP	Syrian pound
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

# Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide relevant information regarding the socio-economic situation in the city of Damascus for use in the context of international protection status determination, including refugee status and subsidiary protection, and in particular for use in updating EASO's country guidance development on Syria.

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)<sup>3</sup> and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Guide (2019).<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology

This report is an update of the EASO COI report: [Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus City](#), published in February 2020. This report covers a number of key socio-economic indicators useful for understanding the socio-economic situation in Damascus, as well as mobility-related issues. It focuses primarily on recent trends, with updated information on 2020-2021 where available.

The information gathered is a result of research using public, specialised paper-based and electronic sources until 5 March 2021. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received from the peer review and quality control process, up until 13 April 2021.

The terms of reference (ToR) of this report were defined by EASO based on discussions held and input received from COI experts in the EASO COI specialist network on Syria and from policy experts in EU+ countries<sup>5</sup> within the framework of a Country Guidance development on Syria.

The ToR for this report can be found in the [Annex II: Terms of Reference](#).

## Quality control

In line with the EASO COI Report Methodology, a peer review was performed by COI researchers from the departments listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

## Sources

This report largely relied on open-source information available through online desk-based research, including from local media sources in Arabic. The report also draws from the Danish Immigration Service COI report on the Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus (October 2020)<sup>6</sup>, based on written sources and information obtained through Skype meetings and email correspondences with sources located in Damascus (Syria), Istanbul (Turkey), Amman (Jordan), Doha (Qatar) and Birmingham (UK) in August and September 2020.

In addition to the paper-based and electronic sources that were consulted, EASO researchers conducted extensive interviews in English with the following sources:

- Zaki Mehchy is a Senior Consulting Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. He is also a co-founder of the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR). His

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<sup>3</sup> EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> All EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland

<sup>6</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, October 2020, [url](#)



work focuses on development policies and he has participated in several research and studies on socio-economic impact of the crisis in Syria, poverty and multidimensional deprivation, labour force, demography, local governance, and community empowerment.

- Suhail Al-Ghazi, Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. In addition to being the non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, he is also a member of Verify-Syria fact-checking platform. His research focuses on the military and security situation of Syria as well as the socio-economic situation in government-held areas.
- An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria. The source preferred anonymity for the sake of discretion and their personal and organisational safety.

Sources were carefully assessed according the EASO COI Methodology, however, Syria is a challenging research environment, as explained below.

### **Challenges in collecting information and research limitations**

The research environment in Syria is challenging. Availability of credible and up-to-date information is limited.<sup>7</sup> The COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic has further limited the ability to conduct field research and report on recent developments pertaining to specific issues.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, media coverage in both Syrian and international media must be carefully weighed against each other. Source and information assessment took place in a highly polarised and politicised context. Bias was mitigated to the extent possible through methodological techniques such as cross-checking, corroborating, contrasting and comparing the information.

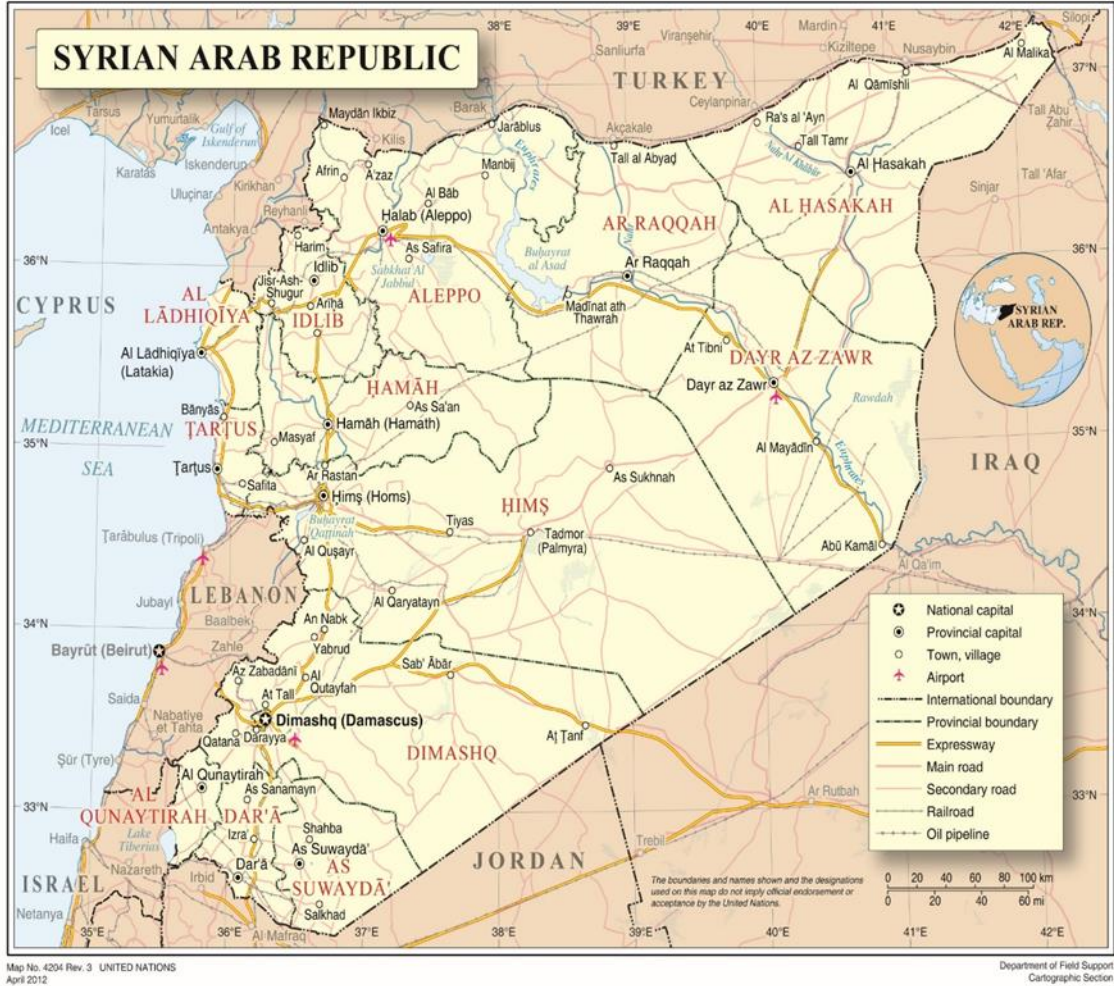
### **Structure and use of the report**

The report is structured in line with the [Terms of Reference](#). The first chapter provides a brief overview of the city of Damascus; the second chapter covers issues related to freedom of movement, and the third chapter provides an overview of key socio-economic indicators for Damascus.

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<sup>7</sup> The UN Human Rights Council mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, established on 22 August 2011 and tasked with investigating all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic, has been denied access to the territory held by the Government of the Syria (GoS). UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/46/54], 21 January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

# Map



Map 1: Syrian Arab Republic, © United Nations<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

# 1. City overview

Damascus is the capital of the Syrian Arab Republic, located in the south-west of the country. It is Syria's principal city and is surrounded by the territories of the Governorate of Rural Damascus (or Rif Dimashq).<sup>9</sup> The city and the governorate of Damascus cover the same area and are divided into 16 main administrative districts: Barzeh, Qaboun, Jobar, Al-Shaghour, Al-Midan, Al-Qadam, Kafr Sousa, Dummar, Al-Mazzeah, Rukn Al-Din, Al-Salihyah, Al-Mouhajrin, Saroujah, Al-Qanawat, Old Damascus, and Al-Yarmouk camp.<sup>10</sup> The administrative boundaries between the city of Damascus and Rural Damascus are difficult to distinguish due to close connections between their environs.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.1 Demographics and ethno-religious composition

According to the latest general census of population and housing, which was conducted by the Syrian government in 2004, the governorate of Damascus had 1 552 161 inhabitants, 796 212 of whom were men and 755 949 women.<sup>12</sup> The Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of the Governorate of Damascus at 1 849 000 as of the middle of 2014 and 2 011 000 as of 2016.<sup>13</sup> UNHCR estimated a total population of the capital at 1 925 387, comprising 1 273 068 resident inhabitants, 647 602 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 4 717 returnees, as of the end of 2017<sup>14</sup>; returnees increased to 16 200 by 2019 according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reporting.<sup>15</sup> The US government's CIA World Factbook gave an estimate of 2 440 000 million as of 2020.<sup>16</sup> Urban areas of the governorates of Damascus, Rural Damascus and Aleppo have the largest figures regarding the population share of people over the age of 60 in Syria.<sup>17</sup>

Accurate and updated information on the ethno-religious composition of Damascus could not be found. In its report on religious freedoms in Syria for 2018, the US Department of State (USDOS) reported on the presence of Alawites, Twelver Shia, and Christians in Damascus, apart from the Sunni Arabs, without specifying the size of the communities.<sup>18</sup>

According to church statistics, the Armenian community in Damascus comprised around 10 000 Armenian Orthodox and around 4 000 Armenian Catholics as of 2010.<sup>19</sup> The Christian population in Damascus remained largely stable<sup>20</sup> and not affected by migration at the same level as other Syrian cities. As stated by the Syriac Catholic Archbishop, the Syriac Catholic Archdiocese of Damascus is comprised of about 1 000 families, compared to 1 200 families before the war.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the US

<sup>9</sup> Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 901

<sup>10</sup> ACU, The Demographic Change & Forced Displacement in Syria. Homs – Damascus & its Rural – Aleppo & its Rural, 20 June 2017, [url](#), p. 18; Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

<sup>12</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, General Census, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>13</sup> Syria, Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract for years 2012-2017, 2017, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, Syria/Damascus/Factsheet, January - December 2017, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>15</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 30-31

<sup>16</sup> US, CIA, The World Factbook, Middle East: Syria, people and society, last updated 8 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>18</sup> USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria, 10 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>19</sup> Gulf News, Syria's Armenian quarter, 29 October 2010, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> Oehring, O., Christians in Syria: Current Situation and Future Outlook, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, February 2017, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>21</sup> Crux, New Damascus archbishop eager to give hope to tired faithful, 23 July 2019, [url](#)

Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) stated that a small number of Jews remained in Damascus and Aleppo<sup>22</sup>, counting less than 100, according to LandInfo.<sup>23</sup>

Many districts and neighbourhoods of Damascus and its environs are formed according to ethnicity and/or the religions of their inhabitants.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Kurds largely reside in the districts of Rukn al-Din and Barzeh and poor informal settlements, for example in the Wadi al-Mashari neighbourhood in Dummar.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, two of the 95 neighbourhoods of Damascus, namely Ash al-Warwar and Mazzeh 86, 'are inhabited almost entirely by Alawites'.<sup>26</sup>

Sources allege that the GoS has been influencing demographic change in Damascus.<sup>27</sup> Harmoon Center<sup>28</sup> pointed to the importance of Damascus in Iran's politics and the latter's efforts to increase its influence in the city via the creation of Shia mosques and the introduction of Shiite symbols and practices.<sup>29</sup> Al-Arabiya stated that the GoS has facilitated the purchase of real-estate properties in Damascus by Shia Iranians, Iraqis and Afghans, particularly in the Sayyeda Zainab neighbourhood, whose population increased from 60 000 in 1981 to 600 000 in 2020.<sup>30</sup> The independent media website, Ana Press<sup>31</sup>, claimed that more than one million Shia Iranians and Iraqis have been granted the Syrian citizenship, the majority of whom reside in the Damascus area of Sayyeda Zainab and its environs.<sup>32</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima<sup>33</sup> reported on the sale of about 27 properties in different areas of Damascus, including Qudsaya, Maliki, and Old Damascus, to persons affiliated with Iran-backed militias<sup>34</sup> while residents of areas such as Basatin Mazzeh and Kafr Sousa were 'stripped of their properties by the Decree 66 of 2012, under the pretext of establishing the Marota City project'.<sup>35</sup>

## 1.2 National context: humanitarian situation and assistance

A UN Security Council report published on 24 June 2020 referred to an 'accelerating economic decline' which impacted Syria, and which had consequences including increased prices of essentials such as food and medicines and aggravated food insecurity.<sup>36</sup> Medicines and baby milk are scarce and food

<sup>22</sup> USCIRF, Syria Chapter - 2020 Annual Report, 9 December 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>23</sup> Landinfo, Syria: Marriage legislation and traditions, 22 August 2018, [url](#), FN. 1

<sup>24</sup> Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

<sup>25</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria – Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 8-9

<sup>26</sup> Tsurkov, E., Syria's Economic Meltdown, Center for Global Policy, June 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>27</sup> Atlantic Council, The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria, 4 April 2019, [url](#); Al-Arabiya, .. فوق وجعهم وجع. [To Add to Their Pain.. Demographic Change Is a Danger Terrifying Syrians], 26 December 2020, [url](#);

<sup>28</sup> Harmoon Center is an independent and not-for-profit cultural and research institution based in Doha and Istanbul. Harmoon Center, Who we are, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>29</sup> Harmoon, التغير الديموغرافي في سورية أثناء حكم آل الأسد [Demographic Change in Syria during the Reign of Al-Assad Family], 28 August 2020, [url](#); Sawt Al-Aasima, المليشيات الشيعية تملك عقارات ومنازل في قدسيا [After Al-Malki and Old Damascus.. Shia Militias Purchase Real-Estate and Houses in Qudsaya], 29 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> Al-Arabiya, التغير الديموغرافي خطر يربع أهل سوريا [To Add to Their Pain.. Demographic Change Is a Danger Terrifying Syrians], 26 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> See Ana Press, About, [url](#)

<sup>32</sup> Ana Press, ماذا تعرف عن ملف تجنيس الإيرانيين والتغير الديموغرافي في سوريا؟ [What Do You Know about the Naturalisation of Iranians and the Demographic Change in Syria?], 9 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>33</sup> A pro-opposition media outlet that covers Damascus and Rural Damascus. See [url](#)

<sup>34</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima, المليشيات الشيعية تملك عقارات ومنازل في قدسيا [After Al-Malki and Old Damascus.. Shia Militias Purchase Real-Estate and Houses in Qudsaya], 29 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>35</sup> SADC, Demographic change: The ultimate goal of the Syrian regime's policy of forced displacement, November 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>36</sup> UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020), 24 June 2020, [url](#), para. 48

prices ‘have risen 230 % the past year [2020]’.<sup>37</sup> On 16 March 2021, the GoS cancelled gasoline subsidies<sup>38</sup> and raised petrol prices in areas under its control by more than 50 %.<sup>39</sup> This increase impacted gas canisters used in homes as well, as the price of one canister rose from SYP 2 700 to SYP 3 850.<sup>40</sup>

In its Needs and Response Summary published in February 2021, UNOCHA estimated that 13.4 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, of whom 1.1 million were in Damascus. According to the source, 6.7 million people were internally displaced, 12.4 million were estimated to be food insecure, 2.4 million children were out of school, and 12.2 million were in need of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) assistance.<sup>41</sup> In an interview with EASO on 17 February 2021, Zaki Mehchy, a senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, observed that during the last few months, the overall living conditions in Damascus have deteriorated significantly, mainly due to the sharp depreciation of the Syrian pound (SYP).<sup>42</sup> For more information about the economic situation, please see [Section 3.1.1 Economic situation](#).

In its Global Humanitarian Overview for 2021, UNOCHA projected the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria at 13 million, out of 17.5 million estimated to be the total population of Syria. According to the source, the long conflict and the financial crisis in Lebanon<sup>43</sup> resulted in a ‘sharp depreciation of the Syrian currency to an all-time low’. This, in addition to COVID-19, has led to ‘unprecedented price increases for staple goods, particularly bread and fuel’.<sup>44</sup>

In July 2020, the New Arab described Damascus as ‘a city full of poor people’ and interviewed several Damascus residents who told of high food prices and long waiting times for goods, as living conditions have deteriorated and some food subsidies through the Smart Card system<sup>45</sup> were cancelled. The Smart Card is an electronic payment card introduced by the government, allowing the holder to buy certain quantities of food items and other basic items at subsidised prices.<sup>46</sup>

The World Food Programme’s (WFP) Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping programme indicated that across Syria, households adopted negative food coping strategies (83 % of surveyed households), the most common of which was consuming less expensive food (61 %) followed by reducing the number of meals consumed per day (47 %).<sup>47</sup> UNOCHA observed that the ‘average food basket in Syria costs

<sup>37</sup> Washington Post (The), ‘Republic of Queues’: 10 years on, Syria is a hungry nation, 15 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>38</sup> Syrian Observer (The), Government Cancels Gasoline Subsidies, Raises Domestic Gas Price, 17 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>39</sup> Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, Damascus Hikes Fuel Prices by More than 50 Percent, 16 March 2021, [url](#); Arab News, Damascus hikes fuel prices by more than 50 percent, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>40</sup> Al-Arabiya, Damascus hikes fuel prices by more than 50 percent as Syrian pound plummets, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>41</sup> UNOCHA, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 4; the numbers are based on 2020 data.

<sup>42</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

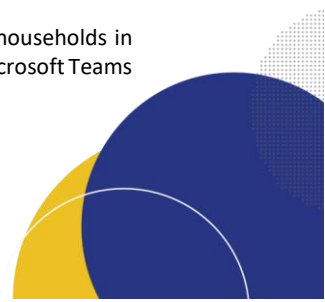
<sup>43</sup> According to the Middle East Institute, ‘[t]he Syrian economy is sensitive to developments in Lebanon given its extensive reliance on the Lebanese financial sector’. Middle East Institute, How is the crisis in Lebanon impacting Syria’s economy?, 28 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> UNOCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2021: Middle East and North Africa, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>45</sup> The “smart card” is a card eligible to Syrians through which they can purchase government-rationed, subsidized goods at authorized retailers every month. The card is used by individuals and families in order to determine how much of each product they can purchase each month (...) While basic commodities such as rice, sugar, and tea are new additions to the system, the “smart card” has been operating in some way or another for almost six years. It was first used by government agencies in 2014, then slowly expanded into certain private sector organizations in 2016, and then was partly responsible for providing heating fuel to families in 2017’. Syria Direct, Smart cards for rationing: how the Syrian government is outsmarting accountability, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>46</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Sources: Ammar Hamou, Senior Editor, and Walid Al Nofal, Reporter, Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), paras. 52, 53; Suhail al-Ghazi, Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>47</sup> WFP, Syria mVAM (August 2020) Issue no. 47, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Zaki Mehchy also observed that households in Damascus have decreased their food consumption to cope with the difficult economic situation: Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021



247 per cent more in October 2020 than at the same time in 2019', which resulted in an increase in the food-insecure population from 7.9 million people in 2019 to 9.3 million by July 2020.<sup>48</sup>

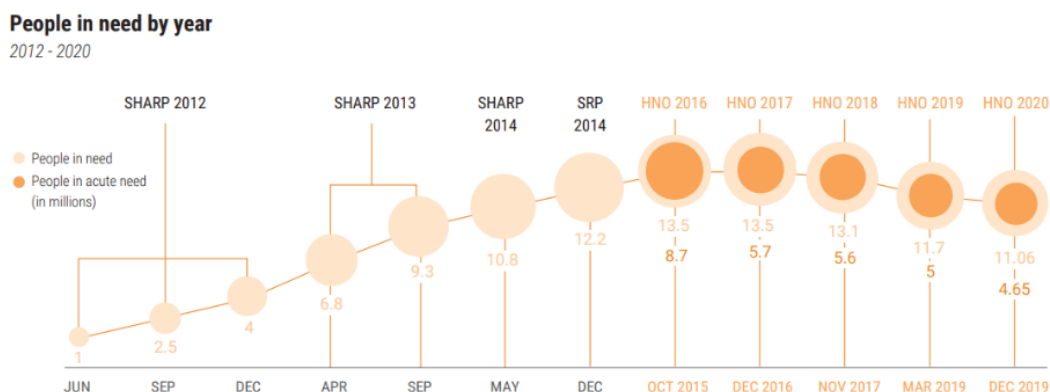


Figure 1: UNOCHA, People in Need by Year 2012 - 2020<sup>49</sup>

The UNOCHA's inter-sector Severity of Needs map for 2021 provides an overview of the areas with the most people in need:<sup>50</sup>

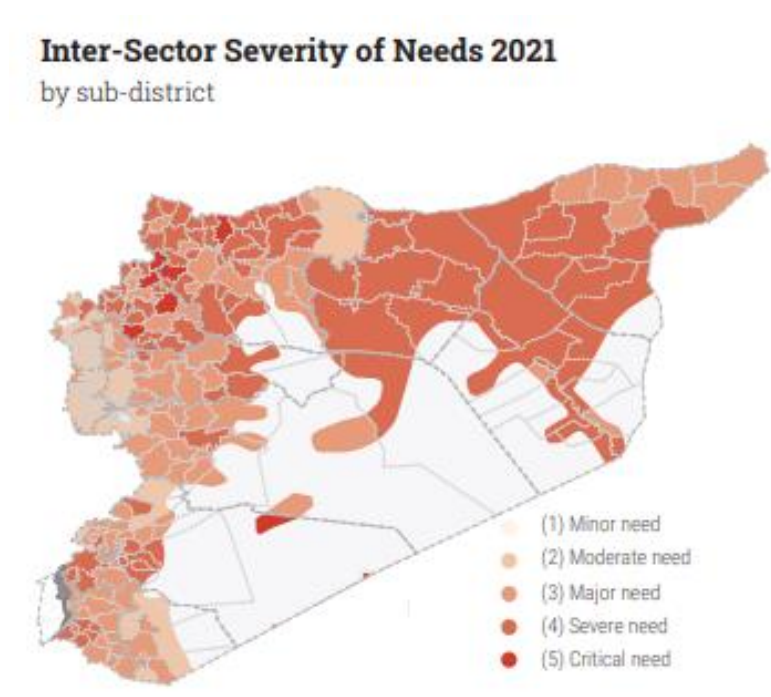


Figure 2: UNOCHA, Inter-Sector Severity of Needs 2021 by sub-district<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> UNOCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2021: Middle East and North Africa, n. d., [url](#)  
<sup>49</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 10  
<sup>50</sup> UNOCHA, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 2  
<sup>51</sup> UNOCHA, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

According to UNOCHA, there were 0.7 million people in need in Damascus governorate in 2020, 0.46 million of whom were in acute need.<sup>52</sup> UNOCHA reported that about 38 % of people with the 'highest severity of needs' (1.9 million people), are in Aleppo and Idlib governorates, 'while another 38 per cent are in government-controlled areas of Damascus, Rural Damascus, Dar'a and Quneitra governorates'.<sup>53</sup> UNOCHA's Global Humanitarian Overview for 2021 indicated that 'acute needs'<sup>54</sup> for assistance in relation to basic services, livelihoods and economic opportunities, as well as infrastructure were observed in several Syrian governorates including Damascus.<sup>55</sup> UNOCHA's Humanitarian Response Plan of 2020 provided the following data regarding operational response in Damascus governorate:

- 0.76 million people were targeted by protection interventions;<sup>56</sup>
- 0.61 million IDPs needed humanitarian assistance, of whom 0.01 million were targeted;<sup>57</sup>
- The severity of need for socio-economic assistance is indicated as 'major';<sup>58</sup>
- 0.62 million persons in need of assistance in education, 0.06 million of whom were targeted;<sup>59</sup>
- 0.79 million people were targeted with emergency food assistance;<sup>60</sup>
- 0.79 million people in need of livelihoods assistance, of whom 0.13 million were targeted;<sup>61</sup>
- 1.92 million people were targeted with medical interventions;<sup>62</sup>
- 0.21 million people needed nutrition assistance, of whom 0.14 million were targeted;<sup>63</sup>
- 0.37 million people needed shelter assistance, and 0.18 million people needed Non-Food Items of whom 0.03 million were targeted;<sup>64</sup> and
- 0.9 million people needed WASH assistance.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> UNOCHA, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>53</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>54</sup> UNOCHA stated that the term 'people in acute need' refers to those facing more severe forms of deprivation in terms of their security, basic rights and living conditions and face life-threatening needs requiring urgent humanitarian assistance'. UNOCHA, 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview, March 2019, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>55</sup> UNOCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2021: Middle East and North Africa, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>56</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 38

<sup>57</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 43

<sup>58</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 46

<sup>59</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 49

<sup>60</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 53

<sup>61</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 54

<sup>62</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 57

<sup>63</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 60

<sup>64</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 64

<sup>65</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 68



## Distribution of People in Need (PIN) at Inter-Sector Level

by sub-district

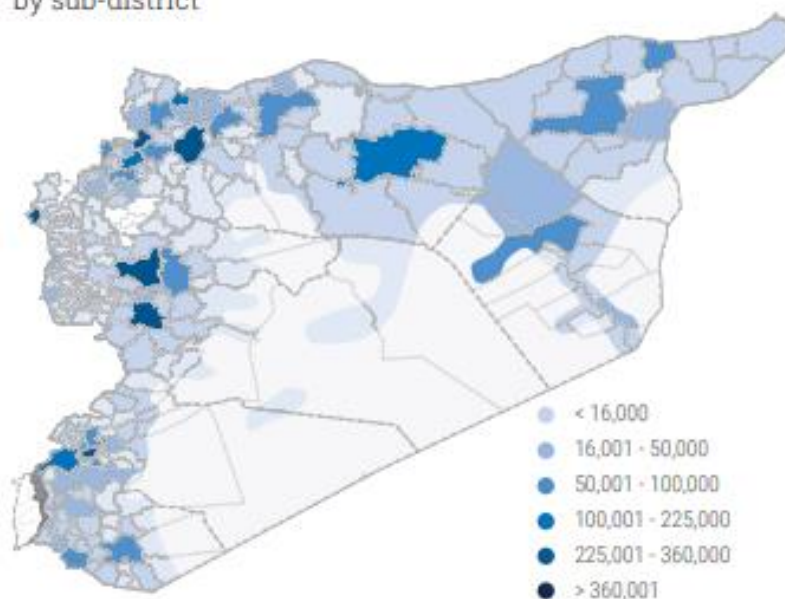


Figure 3: UNOCHA, Distribution of People in Need (PIN) at Inter-Sector Level by sub-district<sup>66</sup>

According to Zaki Mehchy, humanitarian aid in Syria is distributed by formal and informal bodies or institutions. The formal institutions include ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and are dominated by the security agencies. He gave the view that the support they provide is mainly directed to pro-government communities and mainly to soldiers. An example of this is a programme run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Labour and intended to provide former soldiers (veterans) with cash assistance and job opportunities in the public sector. As for the informal bodies, Mehchy mentioned that they are comprised of civil society actors and include UN agencies and other international organisations, 'regime-led' civil society organisations such as Syria Trust for Development (Al-Amana Al-Souriya Lil Tanmiya, whose Head of Board of Trustees is Asma Al-Assad, the wife of Bashar Al-Assad); and traditional civil society actors that include local charities.<sup>67</sup> A COI report of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs published in July 2019 also stated that a range of UN agencies, international humanitarian organisations and civil society NGOs were providing humanitarian assistance and aid to displaced persons in Syria. They provided food, medical assistance, and vaccinations, but required government authorisation to do so, which was not always granted, sometimes preventing organisations from doing their work.<sup>68</sup>

Mehchy stated that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour provides a list of local organisations with whom the UN agencies need to cooperate.<sup>69</sup> The Humanitarian and Social Research Center (INSAMER) stated that the UN aid in Syria is distributed through the Syrian Red Crescent which cannot act 'without the approval of the country's High Relief Committee, which requires signatures from the Syrian Minister of Health, the Air Security Branch, and the military intelligence agencies'. This, according to the source, has 'allowed the Syrian regime to control the places, distribution times, and beneficiaries

<sup>66</sup> UNOCHA, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>67</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>68</sup> Netherlands, MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation, (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 77

<sup>69</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021



of the aids'.<sup>70</sup> In an article published by the Center for Global Policy, Elizabeth Tsurkov<sup>71</sup> observed that international NGOs and UN agencies 'are forced to deal with regime corruption, wartime conditions, and nervous donors who do not want to be perceived as contributing to reconstruction projects carried out under the Assad regime'.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Mehchy gave the opinion that humanitarian assistance is used for increasing the GoS' popular legitimacy in Damascus, and that aid provision in Damascus, and in government-controlled areas in general, is affected by corruption all along the distribution chain.<sup>73</sup> Aljazeera reported on cases of corruption and nepotism that impacted aid provision in GoS-controlled areas<sup>74</sup>, and Tsurkov alleged that humanitarian assistance is used for rewarding loyalists through manipulating 'scarce resources for political purposes'.<sup>75</sup>

### 1.3 Displacement and return

A Habitat International research from 2020 assessed that around one million IDPs from 'settled temporarily or permanently in the city, whereas a large share of the residential properties in the formerly rebel-held eastern and southern fringe of the city is destroyed'.<sup>76</sup> There were a total of about 625 000 long-term IDPs in Damascus, according to UNOCHA's 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) report on Syria from March 2019.<sup>77</sup> IDPs lived on 43 sites in Damascus, the majority of which were 'collective centres' (public buildings, factories, etc. used to house five or more IDP families) or informal settlements where they encountered poor access to basic services.<sup>78</sup>

UNOCHA provided the following data regarding IDP movements in the 14 Syrian governorates for 2016-2020, including Damascus:<sup>79</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Insamer, Political interests in Syrian Humanitarian Aid, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Tsurkov is a researcher who focuses on Syria and Iraq. She is a Research Fellow at the Forum for Regional Thinking and a doctoral student at Princeton University's politics department. For more information see: [url](#)

<sup>72</sup> Tsurkov, E., Syria's Economic Meltdown, Center for Global Policy, June 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>73</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>74</sup> Aljazeera, مواد إغاثية في قبضة السماسرة والتجار.. كيف تنهب المساعدات الإنسانية في سوريا؟ [Relief items in the hands of brokers and traders.. How humanitarian aid is stolen in Syria?], 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>75</sup> Tsurkov, E., Syria's Economic Meltdown, Center for Global Policy, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 7-8; Insamer, Political interests in Syrian Humanitarian Aid, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>76</sup> Wind, B. and Ibrahim, B., The war-time urban development of Damascus: How the geography- and political economy of warfare affects housing patterns, Habitat International, Vol. 96, February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>77</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 16, 31

<sup>78</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019 – Syrian Arab Republic, March 2019, [url](#), pp. 56-58

<sup>79</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 8 February 2021, [url](#); The Humanitarian Data Exchange website, from which the IDP and return movement data is retrieved, states that 'Data contains: - Monthly full details data sets for IDP movements and spontaneous IDP returns estimations. - In each file there is summary table for spontaneous IDP arrival estimations at governorates level since January-2016. - In each file there is summary table for spontaneous IDP returns estimations at governorates level since August-2018'. Humanitarian Data Exchange, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements Data, n. d., [url](#)

Governorate	2016 Total	2017 Total	2018 Total	2019 Total	2020 Total	IDP Total
Aleppo	821,865	642,694	494,190	437,874	726,072	3,122,695
Al-Hasakeh	59,506	297,408	32,016	136,773	15,087	540,790
Ar-Raqqa	65,314	491,081	22,490	58,101	6,178	643,164
As-Sweida	12,833	3,809	12,661	362	998	30,663
Damascus	<b>24,579</b>	<b>47,053</b>	<b>7,479</b>	<b>2,409</b>	<b>1,311</b>	<b>82,831</b>
Dar'a	226,843	125,605	130,256		1,161	483,865
Deir-ez-Zor	42,814	253,366	26,304	51,558	14,576	388,618
Hama	146,246	105,067	15,029	2,412	4,506	273,260
Homs	63,188	25,241	4,511	13,385	2,426	108,751
Idleb	529,168	639,321	685,891	1,095,958	1,029,661	3,979,999
Lattakia	15,702	16,528	18,365	16,703	11,386	78,684
Quneitra	7,232	21,801	24,787	39		53,859
Rural Damascus	118,854	113,783	148,844	2,602	323	384,406
Tartous	14,354	14,310	11,161	9,754	8,288	57,867
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,148,498</b>	<b>2,797,067</b>	<b>1,633,984</b>	<b>1,827,930</b>	<b>1,821,973</b>	<b>10,229,452</b>

Figure 4: UNOCHA, Syria: IDP movements by governorate (2016-2020 data summary)<sup>80</sup>

UNOCHA provided the following data regarding IDP returns in the 14 Syrian governorates for 2016-2020, including Damascus:<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 8 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>81</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 8 February 2021, [url](#); The Humanitarian Data Exchange website, from which the IDP and return movement data is retrieved, states that 'Data contains: - Monthly full details data sets for IDP movements and spontaneous IDP returns estimations. - In each file there is summary table for IDP arrival estimations at governorates level since January-2016. - In each file there is summary table for spontaneous IDP returns estimations at governorates level since August-2018'. Humanitarian Data Exchange, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements Data, n. d., [url](#)

Governorate	2017 Total	2018 Total	2019 Total	2020 Total	Returnees Total
Aleppo	469,729	177,790	64,455	128,088	840,062
Al-Hasakeh	10,287	18,709	54,530	9,301	92,827
Ar-Raqqa	62,081	160,861	11,824	6,686	241,452
As-Sweida	199	2,460	1,645	50	4,354
Damascus	<b>6,971</b>	<b>12,822</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>930</b>	<b>21,065</b>
Dar'a	13,540	446,710	89,552	13,275	563,077
Deir-ez-Zor	524	173,636	78,905	22,851	275,916
Hama	120,757	48,019	24,870	14,809	208,455
Homs	9,540	35,129	43,960	10,978	99,607
Idleb	32,817	138,085	79,919	234,950	485,771
Lattakia	132	605			737
Quneitra	665	42,751	8,583		51,999
Rural Damascus	37,068	156,995	35,550	6,101	235,714
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>764,310</b>	<b>1,414,572</b>	<b>494,135</b>	<b>448,019</b>	<b>3,121,036</b>

Figure 5: UNOCHA, Syria: IDP Return movements by governorate (2017-2020 data summary)<sup>82</sup>

Regarding the breakdown of the displacement movement in Damascus governorate in 2020 by month, the following table was generated using data pulled from UNOCHA monthly reports:<sup>83</sup>

Month	IDPs departure from Damascus (incl. displacement within Damascus and to outside)	Displacement within Damascus (incl. displacement within Damascus only)	IDPs arrival to Damascus (incl. displacement to locations within Damascus and from outside)
January	365	205	205
February	568	370	382
April	39		
May	20		
June	377	197	197
July	385	215	222
August	175		
September	140		13
October	324		7
November	440		10
December	248		

Figure 6: UNOCHA, Syria: IDP movements in Damascus governorate in 2020 by month<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP movements and IDP spontaneous return movements data [second sheet tab – Summary since 2016], updated 8 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>83</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements April 2020, 31 May 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements June 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements July 2020, 9 September 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements August 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements September 2020, 27 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements November 2020, 4 January 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements December 2020, 29 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>84</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements April 2020, 31 May 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements June 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements July 2020, 9 September 2020, [url](#)

Regarding the breakdown of the return movement in Damascus governorate in 2020 by month, the following table was generated using data pulled from UNOCHA monthly reports:<sup>85</sup>

Month	IDPs return to Damascus (incl. return from locations within Damascus and from outside)	IDPs return within Damascus (incl. return within Damascus only)	IDPs return from Damascus (incl. return to locations within Damascus and to outside)
January	210		815
February	190	35	3000
April			25
May	90		18
June			976
July	145	145	501
August			595
September			636
October	170		896
November	125	125	515
December			277

Figure 7: UNOCHA, Syria: IDP return movements in Damascus governorate in 2020 by month<sup>86</sup>

Zaki Mehchy stated that IDPs lived in very difficult conditions. Many of the IDPs in Damascus lived with their relatives, which has increased the burden on households. Some IDPs lived in unfinished buildings that did not have a sewage system or access to drinking water.<sup>87</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria interviewed by EASO on 17 February 2021, stated that generally, the IDPs economic situation was poor, and that there were long queues at distribution points for humanitarian assistance.<sup>88</sup>

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UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements August 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements September 2020, 27 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements November 2020, 4 January 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements December 2020, 29 January 2021, [url](#); Abdin\_suggests that in general terms, it is preferable to take into account data for Rural Damascus governorate to develop a more accurate picture of the situation in Damascus city. Abdin, Y., The Fragility of Community Security in Damascus and its Environs, International Review of the Red Cross, (IRRC No. 906), April 2019, [url](#), p. 900

<sup>85</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns April 2020, 2 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns June 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns July 2020, 9 September 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns August 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns September 2020, 27 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns November 2020, 6 January 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns December 2020, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>86</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns January 2020, 25 February 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns February 2020, 6 April 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns April 2020, 2 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns May 2020, 25 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns June 2020, 23 July 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns July 2020, 9 September 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns August 2020, 8 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns September 2020, 27 October 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns October 2020, 24 November 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns November 2020, 6 January 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Spontaneous Returns December 2020, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>87</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>88</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams, 17 February 2021

## 1.4 Situation of Covid-19

The GoS confirmed the first COVID-19 case on 22 March 2020<sup>89</sup>, and imposed several measures including the ban on inter-governorate movement, curfew and temporary closure of businesses.<sup>90</sup> The World Health Organization's (WHO) COVID-19 Dashboard indicated a total of 15 753 confirmed cases and 1 045 deaths in Syria as of 4 March 2021.<sup>91</sup> The Syrian Ministry of Health (MoH) shared the same numbers, and reported 57 new COVID-19 cases on 3 March 2021, bringing the total number of cases up to 15 753.<sup>92</sup> Those numbers, UNOCHA and WHO observed, do not include areas outside of the GoS control, i.e. north-east Syria which registered 8 227 cases as of 9 January 2021 and north-west Syria in which 20 717 cases were reported as of 12 January 2021.<sup>93</sup> The same report further noted that it is 'likely that the actual number of cases far exceeds official figures, with significant numbers of asymptomatic and mild cases, in particular, going undetected' due to lack of proper testing capacity across Syria. The source added that reluctance to seek treatment at hospitals and community stigma might be hindering 'significant numbers of people with symptoms' from seeking tests or treatment.<sup>94</sup> As regards the number of cases in Damascus governorate, several sources cited Ahmed Habas, the deputy director of health directorate in Damascus, who estimated that in August 2020 there were around 112 500 cases in and around the capital.<sup>95</sup>

Zaki Mehchy stated that the numbers issued by the MoH are too low due to lack of transparency and efficiency. According to him, in the early days of the pandemic, the government dealt with the issue from a security perspective as security agencies prevented the dissemination of information regarding the detection of cases (medical staff were prevented from sharing information on the situation) in order to avoid potential social unrest.<sup>96</sup>

The restrictive measures imposed in March 2020 were relaxed in the second half of May 2020 as the authorities lifted the travel ban between governorates and the daily curfew, and allowed the reopening of businesses as of 26 May 2020.<sup>97</sup> According to US Agency for International Development (USAID), this progressive relaxation of containment measures was the result of the authorities'

<sup>89</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 12

<sup>90</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 12; Rai Al-Youm, *الحكومة السورية تصدر قرار بحظر تجوال عام بين مراكز المدن والمحافظات اعتباراً من الأحد المقبل وحتى إشعار آخر* [Syrian Government issues a decision imposing a general curfew between cities and governorates entering into force next Sunday until further notice], 27 March 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 04, 2 April 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>91</sup> WHO, WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard, 15 February 2021, [url](#); the Dashboard is updated constantly. Regarding the data sources, WHO states that 'From the 31 December 2019 to the 21 March 2020, WHO collected the numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths through official communications under the International Health Regulations (IHR, 2005), complemented by monitoring the official ministries of health websites and social media accounts. Since 22 March 2020, global data are compiled through WHO region-specific dashboards (see links below), and/or aggregate count data reported to WHO headquarters daily' [url](#)

<sup>92</sup> Syria, Ministry of Health, *٥٧ إصابة جديدة بفيروس كورونا ما يرفع العدد الإجمالي إلى ١٥٧٥٣* [57 new COVID-19 cases registered bringing the total number of cases up to 15 753], 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>93</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic COVID-19 Response Update No.14, 13 January 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>94</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic COVID-19 Response Update No.14, 13 January 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>95</sup> Independent, *Assad slams new wide-ranging US sanctions, saying they're part of drive to 'choke' Syrians*, 12 August 2020, [url](#); NewLines, *'It's like Judgment Day': Syrians Recount Horror of an Underreported COVID-19 Outbreak*, 11 October 2020, [url](#); Makki, D., [Twitter], posted on: 3 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>96</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; El-Dorar, *"مخابرات الأسد" تعتقل كوادر طبية في دمشق.. وهذه*, *وهذه* [Assad's intelligence arrest medical staff in Damascus.. and this is how Corona virus is involved], 18 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>97</sup> USAID, Syria – Complex Emergency: Fact Sheet #8, Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, 8 June 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 11, 30 May 2020, [url](#), p. 2

seeming to be unwilling to enforce such measures and the communities' seeming to be unwilling or unable to comply with them.<sup>98</sup>

In July 2020, it was reported that entering into Syria was limited to the border crossings with Lebanon and travellers were requested to do polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests in one of four hospitals in Lebanon: Rafiq Al-Hariri Hospital (Beirut), Al-Herawi Hospital (Zahle), Tripoli Public Hospital (Tripoli), or Tebnin Public Hospital (in southern Lebanon). The test cost USD 100 and the results were valid for 18 hours.<sup>99</sup> Many of the remaining mitigation measures were lifted by the end of September 2020, and entry into Syria was allowed through all border crossings and Damascus International Airport (DAM), provided that travellers presented a negative PCR test result issued less than 96 hours prior to entering the country and abided by a five-day home quarantine.<sup>100</sup> According to Zaki Mehchy, as of the interview done on 17 February 2021, there were no measures in place to contain COVID-19 even at border crossings.<sup>101</sup> UNOCHA and WHO's COVID-19 Response Update No 15, however, stated that as of 10 February 2021, 'most land borders into Syria remain closed, with some limited exemptions (from Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon), including commercial and relief shipments, and movement of humanitarian and international organization personnel'. As of mid-February 2021, Damascus International Airport was reported to be operational and the GoS 'continues to maintain a widespread easing of preventive measures introduced in late May' (2020).<sup>102</sup>

The pandemic impacted the economic situation and the livelihoods of the residents of Damascus. In a survey that included 1 772 households across Syria, WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping Project observed that between April and August 2020, 67 % of households in Damascus lost one or more sources of income since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>103</sup> According to the survey, 33 % of households in Damascus reported inadequate food consumption between March and August 2020.<sup>104</sup> In April 2020, Syrian academics estimated significant economic losses to the Syrian economy as a result of the mitigation measures such as suspension of work imposed by the government.<sup>105</sup> During that period, supply chains were affected and food prices increased significantly.<sup>106</sup> In an article published in June 2020 by the Center for Global Policy, Elizabeth Tsurkov stated that the COVID-19 crisis 'dealt one more blow to an economy that was already in freefall, accelerating Syria's decline toward a stage where the regime cannot feed even its own base, which includes members of the Alawite community, families of fallen soldiers, and public servants.'<sup>107</sup> The containment measures imposed by the Syrian government together with the depreciation of the Lebanese currency 'contributed to the sharp economic downturn' in Syria.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>98</sup> USAID, iMMAP, Situation Analysis: Period September 23 – 20 October 2020, 11 December 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>99</sup> Business2Business Syria, [الحكومة السورية: أهلاً بكم في دمشق ولكن](#) [Syrian Government: Welcome to Damascus, but!], 18 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>100</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic COVID-19 Response Update No.11, 7 October 2020, [url](#), p. 3; Al-Watan, [سوريا تحدد شروط الدخول والخروج عبر المنافذ البرية ومطار دمشق](#) [Syria specifies the conditions of entrance and exit via the land border crossings and Damascus Airport], 27 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>101</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>102</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic COVID-19 Response Update No.15, 16 February 2021, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>103</sup> WFP, Syria mVAM (August 2020) Issue no. 47, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>104</sup> WFP, Syria mVAM (August 2020) Issue no. 47, 4 August 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>105</sup> Al-Watan, [أكاديمي يقدر خسارة الاقتصاد بنحو ألف مليار ليرة شهرياً](#) [An academic estimates monthly economic losses of 1 trillion Syrian Pounds], 11 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>106</sup> WFP, WFP Syria Situation Report #7, July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>107</sup> Tsurkov, E., Syria's Economic Meltdown, Center for Global Policy, June 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>108</sup> Tsurkov, E., Syria's Economic Meltdown, Center for Global Policy, June 2020, [url](#), p. 4

## 2. Internal mobility

### 2.1 Airports and flight connections

Damascus International Airport (DAM) is located 30 km south-east of downtown Damascus; about 30 minutes by car.<sup>109</sup> Damascus airport is reportedly controlled by Air Force Intelligence services<sup>110</sup> which have an office inside the building of the airport.<sup>111</sup>

The precautionary measures taken by the Syrian government to counter the spread of COVID-19 in late March 2020 impacted Syria's border crossings and Damascus International Airport as international flights were suspended.<sup>112</sup> The Associated Press (AP) reported on 23 March 2020 that the airport was closed to commercial flights<sup>113</sup>, and repatriation flights were organised by Syrian Airlines.<sup>114</sup> This closure lasted for several months and ended on 1 October 2020 as the airport was officially reopened.<sup>115</sup> As of March 2021, Damascus airport was reported by UNOCHA to be operational.<sup>116</sup>

As of March 2021, a negative PCR test issued not more than 96 hours before departure was required for travellers coming into Syria from official border crossing points with Lebanon.<sup>117</sup> The security website, Garda World, stated in September 2020 that passengers entering Syria would be tested upon arrival and would be required to quarantine in Ebla Hotel, on the road between the airport and Damascus city, until the test results were out.<sup>118</sup>

Simultaneously with reopening the airport, the Ministry of Transportation announced the schedule of international flights to and from Damascus airport. The schedule included three flights to Cairo (Egypt), two to Beirut (Lebanon) and one to Khartoum (Sudan), in addition to two one-off flights to Kuwait.<sup>119</sup> A Facebook page entitled 'Damascus International Airport' announced on 7 February 2021 the addition of Doha (Qatar) to the list of international destinations operated by Syrian Airlines.<sup>120</sup> Cham Wings, a private Syrian airline company which is under US sanctions<sup>121</sup>, stated that it operated flights from Damascus Airport to the following destinations: Moscow, Kuwait, Muscat, Erbil, Yerevan, Beirut, Baghdad, Qamishli, Tehran, and Najaf.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Damascus International airport, Maps of Damascus Airport, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>110</sup> New York Times (The), Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent, 11 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>111</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021, Suhail Al-Ghazi is a Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. In addition to being the non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, he is also a member of Verify-Syria fact checking platform. His research focuses on the military and security situation of Syria as well as the socioeconomic situation in government-held areas.

<sup>112</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 04, 2 April 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>113</sup> AP, War-torn Syria braces for lockdown after first virus case, 23 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>114</sup> Pars Today, Syria reopens Damascus international airport after months of closure over COVID-19, 2 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>115</sup> SANA, عودة حركة الطيران إلى مطار دمشق الدولي أمام المسافرين - فيديو [After months of suspension... Flights return to Damascus International Airport for passengers – video], 1 October 2020, [url](#); Xinhua Net, Damascus int'l airport reopens after months of closure, 2 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>116</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 24, 3 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>117</sup> UNOCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 24, 3 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>118</sup> Garda World, Syria: Authorities announce Damascus International Airport to reopen from October 1 /update 5, 19 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>119</sup> SANA, النقل تعلن برنامج رحلات التشغيل المنتظم للسورية للطيران من وإلى مطار دمشق الدولي [Transportation announces the schedule of regular flights operated by Syrian Airlines from and to Damascus International Airport], 29 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>120</sup> Damascus International Airport, [Facebook], posted on: 7 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>121</sup> US, Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Additional Individuals and Entities in Response to Continuing Violence in Syria, 23 December 2016, [url](#)

<sup>122</sup> Cham Wings Airlines, Our Destinations, n. d., [url](#)

The flight tracker Flightradar24 which provides real-time information about scheduled destination/routes for the most recent week, indicated that as of beginning of April 2021 flight routes from Damascus were being operated to Abidjan, Khartoum, Amman, Beirut, Erbil, Baghdad, Najaf, Kuwait, Basra, Tehran.<sup>123</sup>

The airport region witnessed several security incidents during the reporting period.<sup>124</sup> Sites inside and around Damascus International Airport were targeted by Israeli air strikes on different occasions in 2020 and 2021<sup>125</sup>, the most recent of which was on 6 February 2021, targeting weapons being smuggled into Syria from Iran.<sup>126</sup> Damascus International Airport is situated in the vicinity of Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah military and ammunition sites.<sup>127</sup> Recent reports stated that Iran has been using UN containers situated 200 meters from the airport to store weapons.<sup>128</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi, a Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus, stated that Israeli air strikes do not target civilian areas or buildings; however, when the air defence systems are activated by the GoS, they may cause damage to civilian buildings.<sup>129</sup>

## 2.2 Freedom of movement

The Syrian Constitution provides for freedom of movement of citizens unless 'prevented by a decision from the competent court or the public prosecution office or in accordance with the laws of public health and safety'.<sup>130</sup> However, in practice, freedom of movement in Syria in 2019 was 'severely restricted' due to ongoing combat and 'proliferation of regime and militia checkpoints'.<sup>131</sup> The GoS 'expanded security checkpoints into civilian areas to monitor and limit movement'.<sup>132</sup> It also imposed 'arbitrary restrictions on freedom of movement' in areas formerly controlled by the opposition.<sup>133</sup> In its 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan, UNOCHA stated 'missing or absent civilian documentation frequently represents a barrier to exercising housing, land and property rights, and freedom of movement'. According to the source, this was 'referenced by affected populations as the top concern for accessing assistance and services'.<sup>134</sup>

Citizens are allowed to travel internationally but the government denied access to passports and civil documentation based on political views, association with the opposition, or geographical location associated with the opposition.<sup>135</sup> USDOS stated that the GoS imposed exit visa requirements and closely monitored Damascus airport and border crossings. The same source reported that the government 'comprehensively banned international travel of opposition members, often targeting

<sup>123</sup> Flightradar24, Routes Damascus, 13 April 2021, [url](#)

<sup>124</sup> Middle East Eye, Israeli attack on Damascus airport kills seven fighters: Report, 14 February 2020, [url](#); France 24, Syria shoots down Israeli missiles over Damascus, state media says, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>125</sup> UPI, Israeli missiles kill 2, injure 7 in Damascus air strike, Syria reports, 31 August 2020, [url](#); CNN, Israel strikes targets in Syria after discovery of IEDs in Golan Heights, 18 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>126</sup> Janoubia, معركة حقيقية في مطار دمشق الدولي.. تفاصيل جديدة عن الضربة الإسرائيلية الأخيرة, [Real war in Damascus International Airport.. New details about the recent Israeli strike], 6 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>127</sup> Atlantic Council, Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, 5 November 2020, [url](#); SOHR, من محيط مطار دمشق إلى منطقة المريج وصولاً إلى منطقة المريج في الغوطة الشرقية.. معسكرات الإيرانيين تتغلغل في المنطقة [From the vicinity of Damascus International Airport to Al-Marj in Eastern Ghouta.. Iranian camps spread in the area], 25 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>128</sup> Enab Baladi, إيران تستخدم حاويات للأمم المتحدة في مطار دمشق لتخزين أسلحتها [Report: Iran uses UN containers in Damascus airport to store its weapons], 13 February 2021, [url](#); Israel Hayom, Report: Iran concealing weapons stockpiles in UN containers at Damascus airport, 14 February 2021, [url](#); Sawt al-Aasima, خاص: إيران تستخدم "حاويات" للأمم المتحدة في مطار دمشق لتخزين أسلحتها [Exclusive: Iran uses UN containers in Damascus Airport to store its weapons], 13 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>129</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>130</sup> Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2012, [url](#), art. 38/3

<sup>131</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020: Syria, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>132</sup> USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 44

<sup>133</sup> Responsibility to Protect, R2P Monitor: Issue 55, 15 January 2021, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>134</sup> UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic, December 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>135</sup> USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 45



any such individual who attempted to travel' and cited human rights groups which reported that activists and their families feared being attacked at airports and border crossings upon attempting to leave.<sup>136</sup> However, confidential sources cited in a Dutch COI report on Syria published in May 2020 stated that exit visas were not generally required for Syrians who intended to leave the country, but that 'certain profiles' needed to obtain permission from one or more agencies to be allowed to cross the borders. Such profiles included government officials, who were required to obtain a permission from their employer and a security clearance; as well as men aged 18-42 who needed to obtain written permission from the military conscription branch if their military booklet did not indicate that they were permanently exempted from the service or had paid the exemption fee.<sup>137</sup>

As regards COVID-19, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that the pandemic did not affect freedom of movement apart from the period where a curfew was in force, neither did it influence the screening procedures at checkpoints.<sup>138</sup> On 10 April 2020, Al-Modon, an internet paper based in Lebanon, which covers politics, economy, society, Arab and World affairs, opinions, culture and media<sup>139</sup>, reported on attempts by the GoS to isolate areas in Damascus city and countryside and to use the pandemic as a pretext to restore its security control, especially after the removal of numerous checkpoints.<sup>140</sup>

### 2.2.1 Return to Syria

The Danish Immigration Service (DIS) wrote that as of August 2018, the government issued a circular that Syrians who left the country illegally during the war would not encounter problems because of illegal exit; whilst previously, under Law 14 of 2014, illegal exit was punishable in principle with imprisonment and fines. The DIS produced a 2019 report on consequences of illegal exit, in which sources stated that they did not know of cases of people punished solely for illegal exit; noting that those who face problems on return are those with other security problems with the government. According to two sources interviewed by DIS, 'by legalizing their status at a Syrian representation abroad prior to return to Syria, persons who have left Syria illegally can return without facing any problem.'<sup>141</sup> However, sources indicate that Syrians who return must agree to sign loyalty pledges to the government, including providing extensive background information and signed statements to cooperate with authorities, or must enter reconciliation agreements.<sup>142</sup>

According to a 2019 report on risks of return to Syria, produced by the European Institute of Peace (EIP)<sup>143</sup>, 'all Syrians returning to the jurisdiction of the state are forced to interact directly with the security sector' including volunteering extensive background information that may incriminate them or their family members with no guarantees about how information will be used, with security services controlling local and individual reconciliation processes, returns of refugees and IDPs and

<sup>136</sup> USDOS, 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Syria, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 45

<sup>137</sup> Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of origin information report Syria, May 2020, [url](#), p. 60

<sup>138</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>139</sup> Reuters, Screen Ocean, LEBANON: New internet paper aiming to offer in-depth news analysis launches in Lebanon, [url](#)

<sup>140</sup> Al-Modon, [النظام يوسع إجراءات العزل في دمشق..دوما الهدف التالي](#) [Regime expands isolation measures in Damascus... Douma is the next target], 10 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>141</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria – Consequences of illegal exit, consequences of leaving a civil servant position without notice and the situation of Kurds in Damascus, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-7

<sup>142</sup> EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6; Washington Post (The), Assad urged Syrian refugees to come home. Many are being welcomed with arrest and interrogation, 2 June 2019, [url](#); News Deeply, Dangerous Exit: Who Controls How Syrians in Lebanon Go Home, 8 August 2018, [url](#)

<sup>143</sup> The EIP is an independent European peacemaking organisation that was initially launched by the Foreign Ministers of Sweden and Finland in 2010. It provides practical and technical expertise and policy advice on conflict resolution. It was founded to support European efforts to respond to global peace challenges. After consultations with EU governments, conflict resolution organisations, EU institutions, and senior peace and security experts, EIP's statutes were signed in 2014. The founding members of its Board of Governors were Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. EIP, About Us, n.d., [url](#)

reconstruction efforts in Syria.<sup>144</sup> According to Amnesty International (AI), returning refugees from Lebanon require the government's prior approval to return and those wishing to return to their area of origin are requested to undergo a security clearance and interrogation by security services.<sup>145</sup>

The EIP reported in July 2019 that the overall number of returning Syrians and IDPs to Syria was a 'tiny percentage' of the 13.2 million Syrians displaced in and out of Syria; with the UN being unable to keep direct oversight over returns due to lack of access estimates are difficult and vary between the government of Syria, Russia, and UNHCR.<sup>146</sup> UNHCR's Portal on Refugee Returns to Syria stated that there had been 230 418 'self-organized refugee returns' documented by UNHCR from 2016 to 31 December 2019.<sup>147</sup> In 2020, UNHCR indicated 38 233 self-organised refugee returns to Syria, mainly from neighbouring countries.<sup>148</sup> On 11 November 2020 the GoS organised a two-day Russia-backed conference in Damascus aimed at facilitating the return of millions of Syrian refugees to Syria.<sup>149</sup> The conference was attended by a few countries including Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Russia, China and Venezuela<sup>150</sup>, while the EU did not attend the conference.<sup>151</sup>

In an interview with DIS, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)<sup>152</sup> reported that between January and September 2020 it documented 38 cases of arrests of Syrian returnees from abroad, either through Damascus Airport or from Lebanon, via official crossings or through smuggling routes. Those returning from Lebanon had previously underwent status settlement.<sup>153</sup> In January 2020, Mazen al-Hummada, a prominent Syrian human rights activist was arrested upon his return to Syria at Damascus airport.<sup>154</sup> His whereabouts remain unknown.<sup>155</sup> In 2020, SNHR documented 89 cases of arrests of returnees from abroad, without specifying the areas of return.<sup>156</sup>

For more detailed information on returns to Syria, refer to [COI Report: Syria - Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility \(April 2020\)](#). Further information returns from abroad to Syria will be available in an upcoming EASO COI report: Syria- Situation of returnees from abroad.

<sup>144</sup> EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-8

<sup>145</sup> AI, Q&A- Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature? 12 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>146</sup> EIP, Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity, July 2019, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>147</sup> UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions – Self-organized Refugee Returns to Syria 2016-2019, n.d. [Last updated 31 December 2019], [url](#)

<sup>148</sup> UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions – Self-organized Refugee Returns to Syria 2016-2020, n.d. [Last updated 31 December 2020], [url](#)

<sup>149</sup> France24, Damascus holds Russia-backed conference on refugee returns, 11 November 2020, [url](#); Moscow Times (The), Damascus Holds Russia-Backed Conference on Refugee Returns, 11 November 2020, [url](#); Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, Damascus Holds Russia-Backed Conference on Refugee Returns, 11 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>150</sup> France24, Damascus holds Russia-backed conference on refugee returns, 11 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>151</sup> EU, Council of the EU, Syria: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the refugee conference in Damascus, 10 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>152</sup> The SNHR is, according to its website, 'an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization'. It documents human rights violations in Syria. For more information, see SNHR, About us, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>153</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 51

<sup>154</sup> HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#); Washington Post (The), He told the world about his brutal torture in Syria. Then, mysteriously, he went back, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>155</sup> HRW, World Report 2021 - Syria, 13 January 2021, [url](#); Washington Post (The), He told the world about his brutal torture in Syria. Then, mysteriously, he went back, 4 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>156</sup> SNHR, At Least 1,882 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest/Detention Documented in Syria in 2020, 149 of Them in December: Detainees Include 52 Children and 39 Women, 2 January 2021, [url](#), p. 6

## 2.3 Travel by road and through checkpoints in Damascus

### 2.3.1 Number and location of checkpoints

On 2 July 2018, Syria Direct reported that by the end of 2017, there were around 280 checkpoints run by GoS forces and allied militias in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates, and that ‘only a handful of checkpoints at the edges of Damascus’ were slated to remain after the opposition-held areas in the two governorates were captured by the GoS in 2018.<sup>157</sup> The Qatifa checkpoint, ‘one of the biggest military checkpoints’ on the northern entrance of Damascus was reportedly removed and merged with the checkpoint at Baghdad Bridge in March 2020.<sup>158</sup> Nevertheless, an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria assessed that there is a large number of permanent checkpoints in Damascus city, but did not provide a number.<sup>159</sup>

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, interviewed for this report in February 2021, most of the checkpoints are currently located in the southern neighbourhoods of Damascus city and in Damascus countryside, as well as on highways that connect the city to the countryside. In Al-Yarmouk Camp, there are checkpoints controlled by ‘pro-regime’ Palestinian groups and by Hezbollah as well as two checkpoints controlled by the Air Force and the Palestine security branches. There are also checkpoints situated on the roads leading to the Assad Palace (People’s Palace) in Mazzeh and to neighbourhoods such as Abu Rummaneh, where prominent officials live (those roads are already closed to public access). Moreover, the source added that there is a checkpoint manned by the Fourth Division on the road connecting Qudsaya and Al-Areen in New Damascus, and another controlled by the National Defense Forces (NDF) in Qudsaya. Furthermore, two checkpoints controlled by the security forces are located on the highways connecting Damascus and Dar’a. In the north, there are three checkpoints: one on the road to Harasta, and two on the Homs-Damascus highway (one of which is controlled by the Fourth Division and the other by the Air Force Intelligence). Finally, in some Shia-majority neighbourhoods in Old Damascus, such as Al-Amin neighbourhood, Syrian (Shia) Iran-backed militias established checkpoints to guard the area.<sup>160</sup>

In addition to the fixed checkpoints mentioned above, Al-Murasil, a news website covering the Arab world and its African surrounding<sup>161</sup>, reported on 24 December 2020 that the military intelligence branch established ‘dozens of mobile checkpoints’ in various neighbourhoods of Damascus, notably in Rukn al-Din, Shamdin Square, Barzeh, and Hamish. According to the source, civilians were stopped arbitrarily and 34 were arrested for security, legal or administrative reasons.<sup>162</sup> Step News, an Arabic media outlet based in the US<sup>163</sup>, reported on 20 December 2020 that Al-Baath Brigades<sup>164</sup>, jointly with intelligence units, established checkpoints in Damascus city and countryside.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Syria Direct, Damascus residents breathe a sigh of relief as scores of security checkpoints come down, 2 July 2018, [url](#); Denmark, DIS/DRC, Syria – Security Situation in Damascus Province Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), p.13; Al-Ghazi, S., MS Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>158</sup> Sputnik Arabic, مصدر سوري يكشف سبب إزالة حاجز القطيفة على طريق دمشق حمص [Syrian sources reveals the reasons behind the removal of Al-Quteifeh checkpoint on Damascus-Homs road], 11 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>159</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>160</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>161</sup> Al-Murasil, من نحن؟ [Who are we?], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>162</sup> Al-Murasil, أمن قوات نظام بشار الأسد تقيم عشرات الحواجز ويعتقل 34 مدنيا في دمشق [Security forces of Bashar Al-Assad’s regime establish dozens of checkpoints and arrest 34 civilians in Damascus], 24 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>163</sup> Step News, التاريخ والتأسيس [History and foundation], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>164</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi stated to EASO that ‘Al-Baath Forces have been disbanded two years ago and merged with the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, and they do not have checkpoints in Damascus’. Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>165</sup> Step News, ميليشيا كتائب البعث تعزز وجودها في دمشق وريفها.. ومصدر يكشف لـ “ستيب” نقاطها الجديدة [Al-Baath militia reinforces its presence in Damascus city and countryside.. and a source reveals its new points to Step], 20 December 2020, [url](#)

### 2.3.2 Procedures at checkpoints

The procedures at checkpoints vary, depending on the location of the checkpoint and the actor manning it<sup>166</sup>, as well as on the mood of the persons manning the checkpoint.<sup>167</sup> The DIS stated that thorough checks are conducted at checkpoints situated on main roads and entrances of Damascus with the most scrutiny being observed at checkpoints between Damascus city and eastern Ghouta.<sup>168</sup> According to the international humanitarian organisation interviewed for this report, the checkpoints conduct routine vehicle checks of persons passing through them. The protocol is that the car is stopped, and the driver/passengers wait inside, while the security forces conduct a search of the car, looking for explosive devices.<sup>169</sup> All checkpoints request to see an ID for car drivers driving in the civilian lane (as opposed to the military lane). Some checkpoints have computers which they use to check the person's National Number, or names, against a central security database of persons wanted for a variety of reasons including security, criminal or conscription reasons.<sup>170</sup> There is no personal search and cars may be searched.<sup>171</sup> The DIS report, however, observed that each intelligence agency had its own list of wanted people, which included those wanted for military service. The report stated that checking one's names against the lists of all the intelligence agencies takes place at major checkpoints where all the agencies are present.<sup>172</sup> The international humanitarian organisation working in Syria also stated that the security personnel manning checkpoints screen those passing through against wanted lists which include men of military age wanted for compulsory military service. Those whose names are on the wanted lists are detained by the security forces. The source mentioned instances where those who have similar names to persons on wanted lists were arrested.<sup>173</sup>

### 2.3.3 Treatment at checkpoints

Sources interviewed by DIS in August 2020 stated that access to Damascus was permitted for everyone from Rural Damascus including eastern Ghouta, and that access may be restricted for one or two days only following a security incident.<sup>174</sup> According to the opposition website, El-Dorar<sup>175</sup>, citing an unnamed source, the 'majority of the checkpoints in Damascus' extorted men for money and threatened to arrest them for security issues. The unknown source added that persons originating from eastern Ghouta, a region perceived by the GoS as pro-opposition, were subjected to more scrutiny and were requested to present ID cards, reconciliation cards and military service documents.<sup>176</sup> Reportedly, royalties were imposed on cars entering and exiting Damascus, a practice seen by informed sources interviewed by Qasioun News<sup>177</sup> as restricting the movement of people

<sup>166</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Syria Direct: SNHR; international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>167</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>168</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: an international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 17; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>169</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>170</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: international security organisation; Syria Direct; Suhail Al-Ghazi; Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>171</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>172</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>173</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>174</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>175</sup> El-Dorar, [عن شبكة الدرر الشامية](#) [About El-Dorar Al-Shamiya network], n. d., [url](#)

<sup>176</sup> El-Dorar, [رشاوى وإتاوات.. حواجز الأسد تبتز المدنيين في العاصمة دمشق](#) [Bribes and taxes.. Al-Assad checkpoints extort civilians in the capital Damascus], 28 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>177</sup> Syrian news agency based in Turkey. Qasioun News, [من نحن](#) [Who we are], n. d., [url](#)

between Damascus and eastern Ghouta.<sup>178</sup> An article by the New Arab interviewed several young people in Damascus and recounted that residents, including loyalists and members of GoS-affiliated militias, feared arrest and extortion at government-run checkpoints.<sup>179</sup> Assafir Al-Arabi<sup>180</sup> reported that the residents of Damascus are forced to change their plans and itineraries and take longer and more difficult routes to their homes and work places in order to avoid those checkpoints, whose main task according to the source, is 'to humiliate and terrorise people and make them wait for hours'.<sup>181</sup> Examples of checkpoint activity in Damascus city are provided below:

- on 13 June 2020 where five men were arrested by the checkpoint of Al-Fahhameh tunnel manned by the state security branch;<sup>182</sup>
- on 3 July, GoS forces arrested five civilians at a checkpoint located at the entrance of the Yarmouk Camp. They were taken to an undisclosed location. Further information on their situation was not available.<sup>183</sup>
- on 20 September 2020 a college student from Sweida governorate was arrested by GoS forces while passing through the Qasr al Mutamarat checkpoint in Damascus city and taken to the Political Security intelligence branch. He was released two days later.<sup>184</sup>
- on 27 and 28 September 2020 where members of the military security branch and the Republican Guard conducted a large-scale ID check and search of vehicles at the Tropicana checkpoint situated on the Adawi street;<sup>185</sup>
- on 15 November 2020 where 20 men aged between 30 and 35 were arrested to be recruited for the reserve military service by temporary checkpoints set up on several streets in Damascus;<sup>186</sup>
- on 22 November 2020 where security agents patrolled the city and set up checkpoints in the wake of unrest related to the depreciation of the Syrian pound and the closure of shops in several neighbourhoods of Damascus;<sup>187</sup>
- on 29 December 2020 where members of the political security branch and Military Police conducted large-scale checks (*Tafyish*) in various neighbourhoods of the city;<sup>188</sup>
- on 31 December 2020, four people were arrested and cargo vehicles were asked to unload their vehicles under threat of arrest at checkpoints following heightened security checks in

<sup>178</sup> Qasioun News, *حواجز النظام تفرض إتاوات على الراغبين بالدخول إلى دمشق أو الخروج منها* [Regime checkpoints impose taxes on those willing to enter or exit Damascus], 15 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>179</sup> New Arab (The), *شبح الاعتقال يطارد الدمشقيين* [Fear of arrest haunts the Damascenes], 20 December 2020, [url](#); New Arab (The), *رعب يلاحق السوريين عند حواجز النظام... تشابه الأسماء... رعب يلاحق السوريين عند حواجز النظام* [name similarity... horror that haunts Syrians at regime checkpoints], 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>180</sup> Assafir Al-Arabi is a digital media platform, based in Lebanon and focused on the Arab world. See [url](#)

<sup>181</sup> Assafir Al-Arabi, *ثقافة الخوف: الحواجز الأمنية في سوريا* [Security checkpoints in Syria: the culture of fear], 12 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>182</sup> Zaman Al-Wasl, *استخبارات الأسد تواصل اعتقال شبان العاصمة دمشق* [Al-Assad intelligence forces continue to arrest young men in Damascus], 13 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>183</sup> SNHR, *At Least 1,882 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest/Detention Documented in Syria in 2020, 149 of Them in December: Detainees Include 52 Children and 39 Women*, 2 January 2021, [url](#), p. 15

<sup>184</sup> SNHR, *At Least 1,882 Cases of Arbitrary Arrest/Detention Documented in Syria in 2020, 149 of Them in December: Detainees Include 52 Children and 39 Women*, 2 January 2021, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>185</sup> SY24, *النظام السوري يكتف القبضة الأمنية على حواجزه بدمشق* [Syrian regime intensifies its security grip on its checkpoints in Damascus], 27 September 2020, [url](#); Jesr Press, *تشديد أمني كبير على حواجز النظام بدمشق* [Widescale security intensification at regime checkpoints in Damascus], 28 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>186</sup> New Arab (The), *النظام السوري يعتقل 20 شاباً في دمشق* [Syrian regime arrests 20 young men in Damascus], 15 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>187</sup> Step News, *حقيقة الإضرابات وإغلاق أسواق العاصمة دمشق في ظل انهيار الليرة السورية* [The reality of strikes and the closure of markets of Damascus in the wake of the collapse of the Syrian lira], 22 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>188</sup> Zaman Al-Wasl, *النظام يشدد قبضته الأمنية في دمشق* [The regime tightens its security grip in Damascus], 29 January 2020, [url](#)

the wake of an Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) attack that killed 28 Syrian Arab Army (SAA) soldiers on the Tadmur-Deir Ezzor road.<sup>189</sup>

Al-Quds Al-Arabi, an independent daily Arabic newspaper based in London<sup>190</sup>, stated that Palestinians residing in towns located to the south of Damascus were required to obtain certificates of good conduct, obtained from 'regime-affiliates in the area', and security clearances to enter Damascus. According to the source, Palestinian IDPs residing in Damascus were banned from traveling to those southern towns despite the fact that they had applied for status settlement.<sup>191</sup> The Action Group for Palestinians of Syria reported on 30 June 2020 that Syrian security forces set temporary checkpoints on roads leading to southern towns and raided houses in Beirut Street in Damascus and arrested Palestinians wanted for the military service.<sup>192</sup>

### 2.3.4 Factors influencing scrutiny at checkpoints

Several sources interviewed by the DIS indicated that freedom of movement between Damascus city and countryside was generally not restricted.<sup>193</sup> Syrians and Palestinians who were on wanted lists for reasons related to military service, political or anti-government activities, and criminal charges were subjected to arrests at checkpoints. Relatives of prominent political or armed activists may also encounter harassment, be interrogated or even arrested at checkpoints.<sup>194</sup>

Suhail Al-Ghazi specified that the person's area of origin plays a significant role in how the person is treated at checkpoints. People coming from loyalist areas face less hassle at checkpoints, while people coming from areas opposing the GoS (or if the person's ID indicates so) risk facing more interrogation and car searches. He added that people coming from the countryside to the city face more scrutiny. Moreover, local residents can pass through checkpoints easily when entering their neighbourhoods of residence, and men aged between 18 and 42 are required to present their military service booklet to show their status.<sup>195</sup>

Unless in case of a security incident, 'the security forces do not check the ID-cards of everyone', particularly those of women and elderly men.<sup>196</sup>

Finally, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that the practice of checking a person's name or national number at checkpoints is pertinent to men and women alike<sup>197</sup>, and DIS stated that generally 'women do not face particular problems with the authorities when moving around in Damascus or Rural Damascus.'<sup>198</sup> Some sources interviewed by DIS indicated occasional cases of harassment of women at checkpoints

<sup>189</sup> Aleppo Today, قهراً على قتلى النظام.. تضيق أمني ومعاملة سيئة على حواجز النظام في دمشق وريفها [Saddened by deaths among the regime forces.. security restrictions and ill-treatment at regime checkpoints in Damascus city and countryside], 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>190</sup> Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Who we are, n. d., [url](#)

<sup>191</sup> Al-Quds Al-Arabi, النظام السوري يشترط على اللاجئين الفلسطينيين «شهادة حسن سلوك» وموافقة أمنية من فرع فلسطين [Syrian regime requires of Palestinian refugees a "certificate of good conduct" and a security clearance from the Palestine Branch to enter Damascus], 13 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>192</sup> Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, اعتقال 6 فلسطينيين على الأقل جنوب دمشق [Arrest of at least 6 Palestinians in southern Damascus], 30 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>193</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor for Studies; SNHR; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>194</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor for Studies; SNHR; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 18-19

<sup>195</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>196</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, October 2020, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor for Studies], [url](#), p. 17

<sup>197</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>198</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [an international security organisation; Syria Direct; Suhail Al-Ghazi], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 19-20

as well as cases of arrests for extortion (e.g. to make a family member who is active with the armed opposition turn himself in).<sup>199</sup>

### 2.3.5 Damascus International Airport and Damascus-Beirut roads

Sources interviewed by the DIS in August and September 2020 indicated that between eight and 12 fixed and mobile checkpoints existed on the road between Damascus and the airport, manned mainly by intelligence branches, the Republican Guard and Iranian forces.<sup>200</sup>

Suhail Al-Ghazi stated in a February 2021 interview with EASO that there were two or three checkpoints on the Damascus International Airport road, but the number could vary. One of the three checkpoints was run by the SAA and the others by intelligence forces. Regular screening of people is conducted by the checkpoint located at the entrance of Damascus, which is manned by an intelligence branch. Moreover, the source stated that there are no checkpoints run by the Lebanese Hezbollah or other militias on the road. However, such militias established checkpoints at highway exits leading to particular towns such as the Shia-majority Sayyeda Zeinab where a checkpoint run by an Iran-backed militia was established.<sup>201</sup>

Suhail Al-Ghazi and DIS stated that there have been no attacks by armed groups on checkpoints on the Airport road.<sup>202</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi added that the most common type of security incidents is when cars pass by a checkpoint without noticing it and are shot at. The source added that arrests mainly take place at the airport, but not much at the checkpoints on the road to the airport. He reiterated that people coming from opposition areas risk more scrutiny and searches than people coming from loyalist areas.<sup>203</sup>

Suhail Al-Ghazi mentioned that on the Damascus-Beirut road there are four checkpoints: the first is located right after the Syrian-Lebanese border and is manned by the Fourth Division; it conducts thorough screening most of the time, mainly for extortion as people would usually pay bribes in order not to have their luggage searched. The second is located near Al-Zabadani and is manned by an unidentified security branch. The third is located in the vicinity of Damascus and is also run by the Fourth Division; it also very often screens passengers. The last checkpoint is right before Al-Mazzeah Road and is manned by an unidentified security branch.<sup>204</sup> The New Arab also reported on the existence of checkpoints manned by the Fourth Division on the Damascus-Beirut road.<sup>205</sup>

### 2.3.6 Neighbourhoods of Damascus with limited access

Sources interviewed by DIS in August and September 2020 indicated that access to some neighbourhoods in Damascus is 'almost completely prohibited due to the massive destruction of these areas'.<sup>206</sup> Sources interviewed by DIS indicated that regarding restricted access and returns, 'restrictions are implemented in areas and neighbourhoods that are severely damaged, are

<sup>199</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Suhail Al-Ghazi; Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), pp. 19-20

<sup>200</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Jusoor for Studies; Omran Studies; SNHR; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>201</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>202</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor for Studies; Omran Studies; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>203</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>204</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>205</sup> New Arab (The), "الفرقة الرابعة" على صفيح روسي ساخن... هل تستطيع موسكو تذويبها؟ [The Fourth Division on a hot Russian stove... Can Moscow melt it?], 16 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>206</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor for Studies; SNHR; SOHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 21

designated as military zones, where basic services are scarce, and/or where demining work is being conducted'. Multiple sources interviewed by DIS stated that security permission is required for residents who wish to enter these areas.<sup>207</sup> The international humanitarian organisation, interviewed for this report, stated in February 2021 that approval from the GoS is required to access several areas in and around Damascus which are heavily destroyed.<sup>208</sup>

## Al-Qaboun

According to Zaki Mehchy, return to Al-Qaboun neighbourhood is prohibited since the area was partially destroyed during military operations. He added that only a few families were able to return after having obtained the necessary security approvals.<sup>209</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima stated that Al-Qaboun, an industrial neighbourhood, was subject to the new organisational chart No 105 (104 according to the Syrian-Chinese Business Council<sup>210</sup>) which made the return to the neighbourhood restricted as 70 % of the total area is to be demolished and reorganised.<sup>211</sup> The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab (CoI) mentioned in an August 2020 report that 'civilians reported that they were still being prevented from returning to their often-habitable houses in Qaboun.' While reconstruction projects were announced in 2018, no significant measures have been taken and civilians could not access their properties.<sup>212</sup>

## Al-Yarmouk

Al-Yarmouk Camp is also a restricted area<sup>213</sup>; 60-70 % of the neighbourhood is destroyed because of the conflict and even to visit the area, one has to submit for an authorisation.<sup>214</sup> The CoI cited reports from civilians who stated that they were not allowed to return to Al-Yarmouk Camp. The same source stated that no official plans for the reconstruction of the camp have been announced by authorities.<sup>215</sup>

In November 2020, Sawt Al-Aasima stated that a new return mechanism was imposed on those who want to return to certain parts of al-Yarmouk Camp. The new mechanism entailed filling authorisation request forms and providing the names of all the family members of the applicant including women and children. These forms are forwarded to security branches for screening. Property deeds are also to be provided together with a fee of SYP 8 000. Additionally, a request submitted to the municipality for inspection and evaluation of the damage to the building is also required to obtain the return authorisation. The source concluded that security branches purposefully banned returns to the Camp, and pointed out that only 150 families were allowed to return based on their affiliation with the government.<sup>216</sup> Enab Baladi stated on 7 January 2021 that 1 200 former residents of Al-Yarmouk Camp

<sup>207</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Jusoor for Studies; Omran Studies; SNHR; an international humanitarian organisation], October 2020, [url](#), p. 20

<sup>208</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>209</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>210</sup> Syrian-Chinese Business Council, Organizational Chart Of The Industrial Area Of Qaboun, 22 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>211</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima, "محيط دمشق: أحياء منسية، والعودة "حلم مفقود" [Damascus outskirts: Forgotten neighbourhoods, and return is 'a lost dream'], 1 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>212</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 31

<sup>213</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, October 2020, [url](#), p. 21; Sawt Al-Aasima, "محيط دمشق: أحياء منسية، والعودة "حلم مفقود" [Damascus outskirts: Forgotten neighbourhoods, and return is 'a lost dream'], 1 December 2020, [url](#); An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>214</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>215</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para. 31

<sup>216</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima, آلية جديدة لعودة أهالي مخيم البرموك، والموافقات لحالات محدّدة [New mechanism for return to Al-Yarmouk Camp, and authorisations are for specific cases], 12 November 2020, [url](#)



filed return applications, of whom 500 applicants were granted access, and that 400 families had already returned to their homes in the camp.<sup>217</sup>

### Other areas

Other neighbourhoods to which return is restricted include Jobar<sup>218</sup> and Al-Qadam.<sup>219</sup> Sawt al-Aasima stated that return was allowed to the parts of Al-Qadam close to the Damascus-Dar'a highway, where basic services such as electricity and water were not provided by the governorate.<sup>220</sup> The source added that partial returns to nine areas of Al-Tadamon neighbourhood were authorised by the Damascus governorate whereby 500 families did actually return, and that return was subject to security authorisation.<sup>221</sup> Finally, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that access to Shia majority towns is subject to screening at checkpoints. The same applies for Al-Areen neighbourhood which is close to the Assad palace and which is a stronghold for the Fourth Division. Visitors from outside the neighbourhood need to provide reasons why they want to enter the area.<sup>222</sup>

### 2.3.7 Settling in Damascus

Five sources interviewed by DIS in August and September 2020 stated that people who want to move from one area of Damascus and settle in another 'will have to obtain a security approval in order to rent or buy a property in the new area'.<sup>223</sup> The international humanitarian organisation interviewed for this report observed that in order to settle/change residence/rent property in Damascus one needs to get a security clearance issued by the security services regardless of where the person comes from (abroad, other GoS-controlled governorates or areas outside GoS control).<sup>224</sup> Enab Baladi mentioned that the application for the security clearance is to be made through the finance directorates of the Ministry of Finance.<sup>225</sup>

According to Syria Direct and Omran Center for Strategic Studies interviewed by DIS, the rental or purchase contract needs to be certified by the *Mukhtar*<sup>226</sup> of the area to which the person intends to move, who then sends the contract information to the security branches for approval. Moreover, both the person renting/purchasing the property and the owner of the property should have no security issues for the approval to be granted.<sup>227</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that for renting an accommodation,

<sup>217</sup> Enab Baladi, 1,200 displaced Yarmouk Camp residents wish to return home, 7 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>218</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Sawt Al-Aasima, "حلم مفقود، والعودة: أحياء منسية، ومحيط دمشق: أحياء منسية، والعودة" [Damascus outskirts: Forgotten neighbourhoods, and return is 'a lost dream'], 1 December 2020, [url](#). Sawt Al-Aasima added that Jobar is open for traffic only as it links Damascus with Zamalka and Eastern Ghouta.

<sup>219</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>220</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima, "حلم مفقود، والعودة: أحياء منسية، ومحيط دمشق: أحياء منسية، والعودة" [Damascus outskirts: Forgotten neighbourhoods, and return is 'a lost dream'], 1 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>221</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima, "حلم مفقود، والعودة: أحياء منسية، ومحيط دمشق: أحياء منسية، والعودة" [Damascus outskirts: Forgotten neighbourhoods, and return is 'a lost dream'], 1 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>222</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>223</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: The international security organisation: Syria Direct; Suhail Al-Ghazi; Jusoor for Studies; Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 22; This has been a requirement since 4 August 2015 when the GoS issued a circular providing that 'all transactions of property purchase, sale, leasing of residential units, and commercial properties require a prior security clearance from the relevant authorities': Enab Baladi, "Security clearance"... Property protection tool or disruption to citizens' lives, 17 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>224</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>225</sup> Enab Baladi, "Security clearance"... Property protection tool or disruption to citizens' lives, 17 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>226</sup> *Mukhtar* 'a mayor of a village or residential area appointed by the Syrian government'. Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Country of Origin Information Report Syria: Documents, December 2019, [url](#), p. 8/

<sup>227</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Sources: Syria Direct; Omran Studies], October 2020, [url](#), p. 22; Enab Baladi, "Security clearance"... Property protection tool or disruption to citizens' lives, 17 July 2020, [url](#)

the rental agreement must be registered at the municipality, and registering an address is key for returns or moving houses.<sup>228</sup> He observed that sometimes a person is denied such an authorisation based on objections from residents of the neighbourhood, the applicant's questionable loyalty to the government or merely for corruption (in some cases when the applicant paid USD 100, he/she received the authorisation). Additionally, when moving houses or furniture, the local authorisation has to be presented at checkpoints. The source reiterated that without the authorisation of the security branch, one cannot rent a property, move to another neighbourhood or obtain a Smart Card.<sup>229</sup>

Zaki Mehchy stated that returnees need to obtain an approval from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, i.e. *Tabu*<sup>230</sup> to prove that they are returning to their own properties in addition to a clearance from the security agencies. He observed that refugees living abroad who wish to return are at higher risk of detention upon return if their records include any actions opposing the GoS or if they are draft evaders.<sup>231</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that returnees who have (or are perceived to have) affiliation with the opposition would face more difficulties to register or obtain an authorisation. He added that IDPs have to obtain new property deeds in case they lost the old ones. The new documents are obtained from the central cadastral archive or from local ones. Another proof that one had lived in the area is also sometimes required for specific areas in southern Damascus, obtained either from the *Mukhtar* or the local municipality.<sup>232</sup> In addition, an authorisation from the local security branch is required to return to the area.<sup>233</sup>

Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that to rent or rehabilitate an accommodation in areas of Damascus that were previously held by the opposition, an authorisation is required, and can be obtained from local security branches instead of the central security as of 2020.<sup>234</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima explained the mechanism to obtain a security clearance for people who wish to return to Al-Tadamon<sup>235</sup> neighbourhood. According to the source, the request form is submitted to the security detachment at the entrance of the neighbourhood or to the Midan municipality, who in turn submits it to the security branches, and the decision takes between 10-14 days. Moreover, a copy of the property deed, family attestation of the property owner and photocopies of the ID cards of all the family members, as well as the deed of determination of inheritance if the applicant is an heir of the property, should be attached to the request form.<sup>236</sup> The DIS stated that according to Syria Direct, 'obtaining a security approval is not necessary for an individual who wants to return to his/her house after having left it during the conflict, provided that the person has documents proving his/her ownership of the house, and if the house is

<sup>228</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>229</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; The 'smart card' is used to purchase government-rationed or subsidised goods and commodities such as rice, sugar and fuel. Syria Direct, Smart cards for rationing: how the Syrian government is outsmarting accountability, 17 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>230</sup> Tabu is the office, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, that organizes the official document regarding the ownership of a property. Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>231</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>232</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>233</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Security clearances were also requested from IDPs who wanted to return to their areas of origin, Al-Tadamon and Al-Yarmouk Camp, in Damascus according to Enab Baladi. Enab Baladi, الموافقة الأمنية تحول دون عودة المهجرين السوريين إلى مساكنهم: مخالفة صريحة للقانون الدولي والدستور السوري [A clear violation to international law and the Syrian Constitution: Security clearance prevents Syrian IDPs from returning to their homes], 21 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>234</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>235</sup> Al-Tadamon was one of the southern neighbourhoods of Damascus that witnessed battles between GoS forces and both opposition factions and ISIL before they were captured by the GoS in May 2018. Enab Baladi, Residents of al-Tadamon neighborhood return home on condition of signing a "pledge", 20 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>236</sup> Sawt Al-Aasima, "محيط دمشق: أحياء منسية، والعودة "حلم مفقود" [Damascus outskirts: Forgotten neighbourhoods, and return is 'a lost dream'], 1 December 2020, [url](#)

not destroyed. If the house is destroyed and the individual wants to repair it, a security approval is needed.<sup>237</sup>

In an interview with DIS, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that in most cases people can obtain security approvals to move to new locations, with the exception of areas whose residents are largely affiliated with the GoS and do not accept newcomers, such as Ish al-Warwar, or if the applicant is involved with the armed opposition.<sup>238</sup> Additionally, Jusoor for Studies, a non-political charity supporting Syrian youth<sup>239</sup>, stated that relatives of a person wanted by the GoS for cases related to terrorism 'will face difficulties in getting a security approval to rebuild or sell a house that is owned by their wanted relative'.<sup>240</sup>

## 2.4 Civil documentation

In Syria, 'a wide variety' of documents are needed for daily life such as birth, death and marriage certificates, ID cards, passports, conscription papers, family booklets and property deeds. Documents are also needed to obtain other documents; primarily the family booklet which is the basis of other civil documents issued, without which basic services like healthcare are difficult to access.<sup>241</sup>

A January 2021 joint NGO research report<sup>242</sup> citing interviews with key informants stated that until the age of 15 the family booklet is a child's main form of documentation, after which they require an individual ID card.<sup>243</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that everyone in Syria who is over 15 years must have an ID card, and men and women are required to present their ID cards for security screening.<sup>244</sup> According to a December 2019 COI report by the Netherlands, multiple confidential sources stated that Syrian citizens must be able to identify themselves with an identity card as from age 14; one confidential source stated that the document is of 'great importance' as freedom of movement is restricted by the presence of checkpoints of both the Syrian state and non-state actors.<sup>245</sup>

According to Laura Cunial, an information, counselling, and legal assistance specialist with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), cited by the New Humanitarian, an ID card in Syria 'is necessary for anything related to registering in school, to passing through a checkpoint, to qualifying for certain social security and welfare benefits, to just being able to have some form of personal identity'. She added that freedom of movement in Syria is dependent on possessing civil documents.<sup>246</sup>

According to Aron Lund, a Swedish author specialised in Syrian and Middle Eastern politics, the years of war in Syria left 'millions inside the country and abroad [...] without the paperwork needed to secure their rights: ID cards, passports, marriage and birth certificates, school degrees, conscription papers,

<sup>237</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>238</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi, October 2020, [url](#), p. 23

<sup>239</sup> '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': Jusoor for Studies, About us, n.d., [url](#)

<sup>240</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, [Source: Jusoor for Studies, October 2020, [url](#), p. 47

<sup>241</sup> Lund, A., No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria's civil documentation crisis, The New Humanitarian, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>242</sup> The report represents the joint work of different organizations, including international NGOs, Syrian NGOs and human rights organisations. It draws on existing publicly available as well as limited distribution data and research reports, including previously unpublished data held by organisations, shared and cross-analysed for the first time. It was complemented by key informant interviews. NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file

<sup>243</sup> NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021, p. 49; private document held on file

<sup>244</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>245</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, Documents, December 2019, [url](#), p. 51

<sup>246</sup> Lund, A., No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria's civil documentation crisis, TNH, 30 July 2020, [url](#)



and so-called family booklets'. He also observed that the problem of missing documents is prevalent among different categories of the Syrian society, but is 'particularly pronounced among refugees, people forced to flee their homes but who remain within the country, and Syrians who have lived under the control of non-state actors for prolonged periods of time – be it rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad's government, the so-called Islamic State, or Kurdish factions'.<sup>247</sup> Lund also observed that some Syrians 'deliberately avoid contact with the state's bureaucracy, fearing it could lead to arrest or forced conscription'.<sup>248</sup> In addition, the problem of documentation seems to affect women more than men for societal reasons, and the lack of documents, such as ID card, marriage certificate, or the death certificate of the husband may render a widow unable to secure her inheritance or hold on to the family home.<sup>249</sup>

Aron Lund stated that missing documentation can have different consequences for different people and that 'one of the most serious problems' is the risk of 'permanent dispossession due to missing or irregular home ownership papers'.<sup>250</sup> Moreover, accessing the food rationing system is dependent on possessing civil documentation. The Smart Card system has been in place since 2014 according to WFP<sup>251</sup>, and with the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of this system has grown significantly. Obtaining this card requires a number of documents like 'family booklets, ID cards, and sometimes national ID numbers and proof of residence'. Lacking such documents may leave numerous people 'locked out of the Smart Card system, losing access to state assistance just as it is needed more than ever'.<sup>252</sup> Moreover, lack of civil documentation is one of the factors identified by the UN as persistent challenges to sustainable return of IDPs and refugees.<sup>253</sup> Lund observed that returning refugees or IDPs who do not have proper papers cannot be legally employed, cannot pass through checkpoints, cannot enrol their children in school, and cannot reclaim their old owned or rented home. Finally, lack of documentation could have detrimental impact on children who could become stateless.<sup>254</sup>

The Syrian Ministry of Interior and UNHCR jointly produced a booklet on Syrian personal documentation in 2018 that states that identity card applications shall be filled at the civil registry where the applicant's records are kept, or at the central department of Civil Affairs in the governorate where they reside.<sup>255</sup> Confidential sources from the Netherlands MFA's July 2019 COI report stated that it is theoretically possible for a displaced person to request and obtain civil documentation in government areas, however that office would need to access documents in the person's home region, which is not always possible, leading the MFA to state that 'the possibilities for IDPs from opposition areas to obtain documents in government areas remain limited'. Additionally, the report remarked that 'this practice prevents some Syrians from applying for documents from the Syrian authorities or Syrian diplomatic representations, as they fear that this may cause problems for themselves or their loved ones'.<sup>256</sup>

A January 2021 joint NGO research report remarked that 'access to civil documentation has been undermined by GOS security checks', noting that applications for obtaining an ID or signing a lease

<sup>247</sup> Lund, A., Who pays the price for Syria's broken documentation system?, TNH, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>248</sup> Lund, A., No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria's civil documentation crisis, TNH, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>249</sup> Lund, A., Who pays the price for Syria's broken documentation system?, TNH, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>250</sup> Lund, A., No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria's civil documentation crisis, TNH, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>251</sup> WFP, Market Price Watch Bulletin: February 2020 Issue 63, February 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>252</sup> Lund, A., No papers, no rights: Understanding Syria's civil documentation crisis, TNH, 30 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>253</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 15 August 2019, [url](#), para. 10

<sup>254</sup> Lund, A., Who pays the price for Syria's broken documentation system?, TNH, 3 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>255</sup> Syria/UNHCR, Civil Documentation and Registration in the Syrian Arab Republic, July 2018, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>256</sup> Netherlands (The), MFA, Country of Origin Information Report Syria, The Security Situation (June/July 2019), July 2019, [url](#), p. 78

agreement are accompanied by security checks undertaken by the authorities on the applicant and its family.<sup>257</sup>

The Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR) stated that on 22 February 2021, the Syrian Ministry of Interior issued a circular which required of all the civil documentation centres in all the governorates 'to grant individuals any civil status documents — including ID cards, family booklets, and civil documents — regardless of whether there are charges outstanding against them'.<sup>258</sup> A director of a civil affairs department, cited by Al-Watan newspaper, interpreted the charges mentioned in the circular as 'court-related cases or specific crimes'.<sup>259</sup> COAR assessed that this interpretation was phrased ambiguously and not immediately clear whether the requirement for security clearance when obtaining civil documentation was removed.<sup>260</sup>

On 1 March 2021, the Syrian Parliament adopted a new civil status law which replaces Law No 26 of 2007.<sup>261</sup> According to the Syrian state-controlled news agency SANA, the new law relies on the establishment of a central electronic database that connects all the governorates and is aimed at simplifying the procedures and reducing the costs for the citizens. Moreover, Article 54 of the law limits the validity of the ID card to 10 years from the date of issue, and required that a request to replace it is submitted between one and six months before its expiry.<sup>262</sup> Additionally, according to the Syrian Lawyers' Association, Article 55 'stated that a valid ID card is considered legal evidence to prove the identity of its owner since he obtained it, and he must carry it continuously and present it to the public authorities upon request'.<sup>263</sup> The new law was criticised by many Syrians who considered it an attempt to revoke the citizenship of those whose ID cards have expired or to generate revenue for the GoS through fees and fines.<sup>264</sup> The GoS announced that changing the ID cards is not required until the new version is issued.<sup>265</sup> In addition, the Syrian Ministry of Interior published a clarification on its Facebook account stating that Article 54 of the new law is identical to Article 56 of the current law which has been in force since 2007.<sup>266</sup> COAR observed that 'Article 54 recapitulates terms spelled out in the 2007 Civil Status Law, which were suspended when the Government of Syria opted not to issue new identity cards'.<sup>267</sup>

Further information on access to civilian documentation for returnees from abroad will be available in an upcoming EASO COI report: Syria- Situation of returnees from abroad.

<sup>257</sup> NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021, p. 48; private document held on file

<sup>258</sup> COAR, Aleppo Council to Relocate Graves, Raising Concerns across Syria, 24 February 2021, [url](#); Syria, Ministry of Interior [Facebook], posted on: 22 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>259</sup> Al-Watan, « تمنح وثائق مدنية للملاحقين قضائياً » [MOI issues civil documents to people with criminal charges], 22 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>260</sup> COAR, Aleppo Council to Relocate Graves, Raising Concerns across Syria, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>261</sup> SANA, مجلس الشعب يقر مشروع قانون الأحوال المدنية [People's Council adopts the civil status law], 1 March 2021, [url](#); Al-Iqtisadi, البرلمان يقر تحديد مدة صلاحية الهوية الشخصية بـ 10 سنوات [The Parliament adopts a law limiting the validity of the ID card to a period of 10 years], 1 March 2021, [url](#); Xeber24, Syrian regime issues new law on civil status.. including renewal of personal cards, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>262</sup> SANA, مجلس الشعب يقر مشروع قانون الأحوال المدنية [People's Council adopts the civil status law], 1 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>263</sup> Fresh Syria, The "Syrian Lawyers Association" clarifies the relationship of civil status amendments to the Syrian nationality, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>264</sup> Syria TV, قانون الأحوال المدنية الجديد: تمهيد لاستحقاق الانتخابات الرئاسية [New civil status law: a prelude to the period of presidential elections], 3 March 2021, [url](#); Baladi, ما حقيقة سحب النظام الجنسية.. بعد إقرار قانون الأحوال المدنية الجديد؟ [Following the adoption of the new civil status law. What is the reality of the regime's withdrawal of citizenship from Syrians?], 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>265</sup> Syria TV, النظام: لا تبادل للبطاقات الشخصية إلا عند الإعلان عن إصدار جديد [Regime: no change of ID cards till the announcement of a new version], 3 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>266</sup> Syria, Ministry of Interior [Facebook], posted on: 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>267</sup> COAR, Syria Update: Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook, 8 March 2021, [url](#), p. 2

## 3. Key socio-economic indicators

### 3.1 Economic overview

#### 3.1.1 Economic situation

In an article for the Center for Global Policy, Elisabeth Tsurkov termed the contracting Syrian economy as being in a state of ‘meltdown,’ pointing to the unprecedented rapid depreciation of the Syrian pound (SYP), and the sharply rising food prices.<sup>268</sup> The financial crisis in Lebanon has accelerated the devaluation of the Syrian currency.<sup>269</sup> Between mid-May and mid-June 2020, the currency lost 67 % of its value.<sup>270</sup> It further depreciated to over SYP 3 000 per USD 1 by June 2020<sup>271</sup>, and to 4 600 in Damascus as of 17 March 2021.<sup>272</sup> The continued devaluation has resulted in inflation and a constant volatility of market prices.<sup>273</sup> Large amounts of Syrian savings in US dollars held in Lebanese banks have become inaccessible to Syria, as Lebanese banks imposed tight restrictions on withdrawals and transfers abroad.<sup>274</sup>

Real GDP contracted in 2020 and was expected to contract further in 2021, with no economic recovery in sight.<sup>275</sup> Extensive imports and the loss of oil revenue has depleted the Syrian central bank’s foreign currency reserves to the extent that it is no longer able to defend the value of the Syrian pound.<sup>276</sup>

As the government has regained control of increasing shares of the country’s territory, its economic capacity to meet the needs of the population under its control is diminishing. Most state institutions have had their capacity weakened.<sup>277</sup> Nationwide, 74 % of ‘basic socio-economic infrastructure’ is damaged, UNOCHA reported.<sup>278</sup>

#### 3.1.2 Impact of economic sanctions

Sanctions targeting key GoS figures and various sectors of the economy, have been imposed on Syria since the start of the conflict in 2011, analysts Zaki Mehchy and Rim Turkmani noted in an article for the London School of Economics. The sanctions have contributed to the emergence of a ‘criminalised’ economy with a network of warlords and GoS supporters connected to it, deterioration in the formal economy, a weakened civil society, and increased suffering for ordinary people.<sup>279</sup> New economic actors have emerged who have found war-related business opportunities such as melting down steel taken from ruins, brokering oil deals illegal under the sanctions, or selling hotel rooms to aid workers.

<sup>268</sup> Tsurkov, E., Syria’s economic meltdown, June 2020, Center for Global Policy (CGP), [url](#), p. 2

<sup>269</sup> NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file, p. 38

<sup>270</sup> Jukhadar, Q. and Tsurkov, E., Caesar Act: The Syrian people are sapped while Assad grows stronger, 2 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>271</sup> Said, S., The COVID-19 and the Syrian Economy – Implications for Social Justice, FES, July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>272</sup> Shaar, K., Hourly black market exchange rates and gold prices in Syria by city, updated: 17 March 2021, [url](#); SP Today, US Dollar/Syrian Pound, updated: 17 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>273</sup> FAO, Agriculture Input and Commodity Bulletin, November 2020, [url](#), p. 1; WFP, VAM food security analysis, July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>274</sup> Reuters, Syria’s Assad says billions locked in troubled Lebanese banks behind economic crisis, 4 November 2020, [url](#); Syrian Observer (The), Syrian Assets in Lebanon in Danger, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>275</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, n. d., 2021, [url](#)

<sup>276</sup> Financial Times (The), Syrian regime struggles to stop currency freefall, 20 January 2020, [url](#)

<sup>277</sup> COAR, Cash crash: Syria’s economic collapse and the fragmentation of the state, July 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>278</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>279</sup> Mehchy, Z. and Turkmani, R., Understanding the Impact of Sanctions on the Political Dynamics in Syria, January 2021, London School of Economics (LSE), [url](#), Executive Summary, p. 15

This ‘new class’ of war profiteers and their businesses helps the government keep up trade and keep oil flowing, generating revenue to fund pro-government militias.<sup>280</sup>

Sanctions targeting oil production in GoS-controlled areas, have created ‘crippling’ shortages of fuel, gasoline, and cooking gas. In the winter cooking gas is in very short supply, causing people to switch to wood as they wait for their turn to buy a subsidised gas canister.<sup>281</sup> Prices of medicine and connected shipment costs have greatly increased.<sup>282</sup> Tax income and oil revenue have become greatly reduced.<sup>283</sup> The Caesar Act sanctions package adopted by the United States in June 2020 greatly limited foreign funding available to Syria.<sup>284</sup>

### 3.1.3 Impact of COVID-19

The pandemic has added ‘multiple disruptive factors’ to those already present in the economy, such as war destruction, corruption, an increasing burden of sanctions, and the spill-over from the financial crisis in Lebanon.<sup>285</sup> In an article published by the European University Institute, analyst Joseph Daher pointed at sectors such as tourism, transportation, trade and construction, having become ‘paralysed’ by the pandemic.<sup>286</sup> The WFP noted that the establishment of new businesses dropped by more than 60 % from April 2019 to April 2020. The domestic food supply chains became significantly impacted, with food prices continuing to rise during the lockdown period mid-March – end of May 2020. The lockdown set off panic buying and hoarding. Price controls were lacking. Agricultural and industrial activities, as well as the movements of persons, became more restricted.<sup>287</sup> The Head of the Banking Department at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Damascus Ali Kanaan estimated the economic losses caused by the lockdown measures at approximately USD 1 billion per month since March 2020.<sup>288</sup>

## 3.2 Employment

### 3.2.1 Employment and unemployment

UNOCHA set the nationwide unemployment rate for the working age population at 50 % at the end of 2020.<sup>289</sup> Zaki Mehchy stated that the official unemployment rate for Damascus was 30 %, but that

<sup>280</sup> Financial Times (The), The men making a fortune from Syria’s war, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

<sup>281</sup> Jukhadar, Q and Tsurkov, E., Caesar Act: The Syrian people are sapped while Assad grows stronger, Atlantic Council, 2 September 2020, [url](#)

<sup>282</sup> Navone, A., Coronavirus Throws Another Challenge at Syria’s Doctors, USIP, 5 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>283</sup> UN General Assembly, Human rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, 21 July 2020, [url](#), para. 45; COAR, Cash crash: Syria’s economic collapse and the fragmentation of the state, July 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>284</sup> Christou, W. and Shaar, K., 2021 budget reveals the depth of Syria’s economic woes, Atlantic Council, 1 December 2020, [url](#); COAR, Cash crash: Syria’s economic collapse and the fragmentation of the state, July 2020, [url](#), p. 8

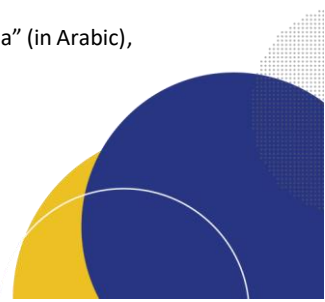
<sup>285</sup> WFP, The Socio-economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Syrian Arab Republic, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 14, 21, 35, 52; Said, S., The COVID-19 and the Syrian Economy – Implications for Social Justice, July 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

<sup>286</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, EUI, June 2020, [url](#), p. 2. Joseph Daher is a Doctor of Political Science and Development Studies, working as a part time affiliate at the European University Institute (EUI) at Florence, Italy. He is the author of Hezbollah: Political Economy of the Party of God (Pluto Press, 2016) and Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience (Pluto Press 2019). The current study is a comparative analysis of state policies and the provision of state services between cities and areas that remained under government control throughout the conflict, and areas that were for a time governed by rebel groups before being recaptured by the government.

<sup>287</sup> WFP, The Socio-Economic Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic in The Syrian Arab Republic (April-June 2020), October 2020, [url](#), pp. 14, 19

<sup>288</sup> Business 2 Business, About a Thousand Billion Pounds the Syrian Economy Losses a Month Because of Corona” (in Arabic), 12 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>289</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 8



this number could not be considered accurate.<sup>290</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria doubted whether good figures for employment/unemployment were available.<sup>291</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that unemployment is common.<sup>292</sup> Exact figures for 2020 specifically for Damascus City could not be found.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong impact on the general employment situation, the WFP reported. The lockdown in 2020 caused closures of workplaces and employment activities that had led to households losing one or more sources of income.<sup>293</sup>

### 3.2.2 Means of basic subsistence

According to UNOCHA, increasing unaffordability of goods and services, negative coping mechanisms such as depleting one's savings and reducing the number and quality of meals, are on the rise.<sup>294</sup> Zaki Mehchy stated that for most people the job is no longer the main source of income. Before the war the job would make up for 80 % of the average household income. After the war the share had sunk to about 30 %. Savings, remittances, and humanitarian aid have become other important income sources.<sup>295</sup>

Sources stated that it is common for people who live in Damascus to need more than one job.<sup>296</sup> Enab Baladi, an independent Syrian media organisation, quoted a local Damascus newspaper that people on regular income in both public and private sector (see [Section 3.3](#) in this report), need more than one job in order to cover the costs of living. It is also necessary that as many family members as possible work. Students have begun to work along with studying, to help sustain their families.<sup>297</sup> According to Zaki Mehchy, the availability of 'decent' jobs is limited. A typical extra job could be taxi driver, though this is hardly profitable anymore due to the increased fuel prices and that more and more people no longer can afford taking a taxi.<sup>298</sup>

In Suhail Al-Ghazi's opinion, most government jobs cannot cover living costs. A teacher, for example, earns SYP 50 000, SYP 60 – 75 000 overtime included. This is a salary that does not cover the basic needs of a family. Even for a family who owns its house and does not pay rent, one job would only cover living costs for a few days. Even for a rented small house or a partly demolished house the rent will be SYP 40 – 50 000 per month. (For more information about wage levels, see [Section 3.3](#) below). Having two jobs is very common, as is two family members both working. Even middle-class families in Damascus usually need two jobs. Child labour is common too, especially for big families with poor backgrounds. For those who have more than three children, one or more of the three will usually have to do child labour. The majority of residents of Damascus rely on aid if they don't work two jobs, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>291</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>292</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>293</sup> WFP, The Socio-Economic Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic in The Syrian Arab Republic (April-June 2020), October 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 49; NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file, p. 43

<sup>294</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>295</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>296</sup> Enab Baladi, How do employees earn their living in Damascus these days? Through legitimate or twisted ways?, 21 February 2020, [url](#); Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2; Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>297</sup> Enab Baladi, How do employees earn their living in Damascus these days? Through legitimate or twisted ways?, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>298</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>299</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021



Remittances sent to households from outside Syria make up for a substantial share of many people's subsistence, sources stated.<sup>300</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi considered that without money from outside and two jobs, 80-90 % of ordinary people would have had to rely on aid to get through daily life.<sup>301</sup> Zaki Mehchy assumed that even if income from remittances and all other sources of income were taken together, they would still be insufficient for households to cover living costs. Households were dependent on the informal sector of the economy, which is substantial.<sup>302</sup> During 2020, the flow of transfers from abroad contracted significantly due to COVID-19 restrictions and tighter restrictions on financial services.<sup>303</sup>

### 3.3 Poverty

The World Bank reported in 2020 that poverty in Syria prevailed 'everywhere'.<sup>304</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported that 80 % of Syrians in 2020 lived under the international poverty line of USD1.90 per day.<sup>305</sup>

UNOCHA's estimate of overall poverty in Syria at the start of 2021, was close to 90 %. It had increased by 3-4 % percent points compared to 2019, due to the emergence of 'working poor' people. Extreme poverty was estimated at between 55 and 65 %.<sup>306</sup>

The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SPCR)<sup>307</sup> estimated the overall incidence (rate)<sup>308</sup> of poverty in Damascus in 2019 at 81 % and extreme poverty at 53 %, having increased from 3 % and 24 % respectively since 2011. The SPCR measured the overall poverty gap<sup>309</sup> in Damascus at 40 % in 2019, as opposed to 4 % nine years earlier.<sup>310</sup> Estimates of the poverty gap for 2020 in Damascus city have not been found.

Damascus is the city with the highest costs of living (food, housing, education, health and clothing) in the country, according to analyst Joseph Daher, citing an article (in Arabic) posted by the People's Will Party, a Syrian opposition group.<sup>311</sup> Based on the percentage of people under the upper poverty line in Damascus in 2019 estimated by SCPR at 81 %<sup>312</sup>, Zaki Mehchy assumed that 90 % of the population in Damascus in 2021 were living under the poverty line. From earlier published research<sup>313</sup>, Mehchy indicated the food poverty level for a Damascus household at approximately USD 150 per month.

<sup>300</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; Schuler-McCoin, H., Picking Empty pockets. Syria's Remittance Economy, Synaps, 8 July 2020, [url](#); New Arab (The), دمشق [دمشق](#) [Damascus sinks in poverty and inflation... and the regime deceives the Syrians], 7 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>301</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>302</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>303</sup> Schuler-McCoin, H., Picking Empty pockets. Syria's Remittance Economy, 8 July 2020, [url](#); Oxfam, For communities already in crisis, a drop in remittances during COVID-19 can mean life or death, 1 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>304</sup> World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>305</sup> ICRC, Syria: Economic crisis compounds conflict misery as millions face deeper poverty, hunger, 28 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>306</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>307</sup> The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) is an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit think tank specialised in public policy research. See [url](#)

<sup>308</sup> SPCR, Syria, Justice to Transcend Conflict, Impact of Syrian Conflict Report 2020, May 2020, [url](#), explained on pp. 95, 96

<sup>309</sup> The poverty gap is the ratio by which the mean income of the poor falls below the poverty line. The poverty line is defined as half the median household income of the total population. The poverty gap helps refine the poverty rate by providing an indication of the poverty level in a country. This indicator is measured for the total population, as well as for people aged 18-65 years and people over 65. (OECD data, n.d., [url](#))

<sup>310</sup> SPCR, Impact of Syrian Conflict Report 2020, May 2020, [url](#), pp. 94-96

<sup>311</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, EUI, June 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>312</sup> SPCR, Syria, Justice to Transcend Conflict, Impact of Syrian Conflict Report 2020, May 2020, [url](#), p. 94

<sup>313</sup> Mehchy, Z., On the edge of starvation: New alarming Consumer Price Index estimates for Syria, Conflict Research Programme Blog [Blog], 26 May 2020, [url](#)

Average prices of ‘all goods’ tripled in 2020, having increased almost 44 times since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. The average wage level did not increase correspondingly, leaving a huge gap. A taxi driver could make an average USD 80 a month, local sources in Damascus had indicated to Mehchy.<sup>314</sup> Throughout the period of lockdown in 2020, fuel prices rose by 21 % for diesel and by 33 % for butane gas used for cooking, according to the WFP.<sup>315</sup>

Sources reported that while wage levels have been fairly stable in both public and private sectors, the general costs of living had risen sharply during 2019 and 2020.<sup>316</sup> For more information on wage levels, see [Section 3.2](#). The average monthly salary of government employees stayed around SYP 60 000 - 80 000 per month, occasionally reaching 120 000. For public administrative positions, salaries could reach up to SYP 200 000. In private sector salaries ranged between SYP 120 000 and 150 000 at best.<sup>317</sup> Zaki Mehchy mentioned that exploitation of workers has been increasing and wages been pressed downwards in private sector. Being paid less than USD 1 per day is not unusual for shop employees, and the physical working conditions are often bad.<sup>318</sup>

From January 2020 to April 2020 monthly total cost of living s for a family of five living in Damascus rose from SYP 380 000 to SYP 430 000 (between USD 331 and 358).<sup>319</sup>

## 3.4 Food security

### 3.4.1 Availability of food

Sources consulted by the DIS in mid-2020, reported that there was no shortage of food in Damascus, but the food prices were high, exceeding the purchasing power of the vast majority of the inhabitants. All areas of Damascus were receiving food.<sup>320</sup> WFP reported in September 2020 about wheat flour shortages that led to a shortage of bread in bakeries in Damascus.<sup>321</sup> The already slim supplies of wheat being further drained through corruption, profiteering and theft.<sup>322</sup> A source interviewed by the DIS stated that in early 2021 the GoS was failing to provide bread, causing shortages in Damascus.<sup>323</sup> Analysts Jukhadar and Tsurkov described the availability of bread as a ‘crisis being particularly acute in Damascus and its countryside’ at that point.<sup>324</sup> Queuing for bread is common in

<sup>314</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>315</sup> WFP, October 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 14, 21, 35, 52

<sup>316</sup> Enab Baladi, How do employees earn their living in Damascus these days? Through legitimate or twisted ways?, 21 February 2020, [url](#); Said, S., The COVID-19 and the Syrian Economy – Implications for Social Justice, July 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3; Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, EUI, June 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>317</sup> Enab Baladi, How do employees earn their living in Damascus these days? Through legitimate or twisted ways?, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>318</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>319</sup> Kassioum (People’s Will Party), “430 Thousand Pounds, the Cost of Living for a Family of Five People Increased by 13 Percent in Three Months” (in Arabic: ألف ليرة تكاليف المعيشة لأسرة من خمس 430 أشخاص ارتفاع بنسبة 13% في ثلاثة أشهر), 6 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>320</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Sources: Suhail Al-Ghazi; Ammar Hamou, Senior Editor and Walid Al Nofal, Reporter, Syria Direct], October 2020, pp. 25, 27, 28], October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>321</sup> WFP, WFP Syria – Country Brief, September 2020, [url](#), pp. 1-2

<sup>322</sup> Jukhadar, Q. and Tsurkov, E., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry; Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>323</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy], October 2020, [url](#), paras 81, 83

<sup>324</sup> Jukhadar, Q., Tsurkov, E., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry; Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

Damascus countryside, even after the Smart Card was launched. Even inside Damascus people may have to queue for bread, sometimes for hours.<sup>325</sup>

The average quota per person daily at 3.5 pita breads weighing 650 grams, amounting to about 950 calories. The quota varies slightly by family size. Analysts Jukadar & Tsurkov considered the government as unable to provide even this quota.<sup>326</sup> One Smart Card is issued per family. It is issued only to families registered in Damascus. If a family is not registered it cannot obtain the card. Even if the family is registered in another governorate it cannot use the card outside their governorate. The amount available to each family depends on the size of the family. The quality of the food that can be bought with the Smart Card is low. During 2020 single persons also started receiving the card. The Smart Card can also be used to buy fuel and cooking gas.<sup>327</sup>

Shortage of fuel has affected the production costs in the agricultural sector.<sup>328</sup> The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) assumed that the high production costs would continue, due to insufficient government subsidies to producers.<sup>329</sup> The high volatility in the informal exchange rate in May and June 2020 caused wholesalers to reduce their food supply on Syrian markets and caused some retailers to momentarily close their shops.<sup>330</sup>

A source interviewed by DIS stated that power cuts have affected bread production in both public and private bakeries. There is also a shortage of fruit and vegetables. People would be able to buy enough food, but the variety is very limited. People may have to go to several shops to find good minced meat that can be safely eaten.<sup>331</sup> In areas where bakeries have been destroyed in the war, local authorities have appointed individuals to transport bread to the markets.<sup>332</sup>

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reported that most of its beneficiaries could receive their cash and food assistance from the distribution branch/outlet closest to their current residence, as a measure to mitigate movement restrictions introduced by the government in response to the pandemic. Beneficiaries facing local movement restrictions and lockdowns have been enabled to get their assistance through another eligible person.<sup>333</sup>

### 3.4.2 Food security levels

UNOCHA/WHO considered it likely that more families in Syria had been pushed into food insecurity during 2020, due to rising food prices and loss of job opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>334</sup> The WFP reported in March 2020 that many of their interviewed households said that due to increased prices they were only consuming only a basic diet consisting of bread, rice, oil,

<sup>325</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Jukadar, Q., Tsurkov, E., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry, Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>326</sup> Jukadar, Q., Tsurkov, E., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry, Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>327</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy], October 2020, [url](#), paras 81, 83

<sup>328</sup> FAO, Agriculture Input and Commodity Bulletin, November 2020, [url](#), p. 1; Jukadar, Q. and Tsurkov, E., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry; Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>329</sup> FAO, Agriculture Input and Commodity Bulletin, November 2020, [url](#), p. 1

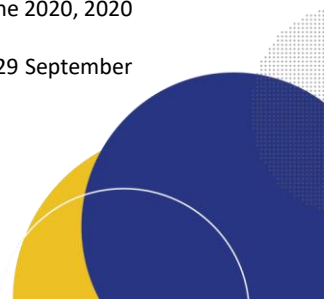
<sup>330</sup> WFP, VAM food security analysis, July 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>331</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>332</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy], October 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>333</sup> UNWRA, Syria regional crisis emergency appeal progress report for the reporting period 01 January – 30 June 2020, 2020 (n.d.), p. 12 [url](#)

<sup>334</sup> UNOCHA/WHO, Syrian Arab Republic, COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 19 As of 29 September 2020, 29 September 2020, [url](#), p. 3



vegetables and sugar. Consumption of meat (lamb or beef) had been heavily reduced.<sup>335</sup> Most people limited their purchases to the most basic food items, while some depended on what they were able to grow themselves.<sup>336</sup> IDPs would presumably be on the lower part of the food security ladder.<sup>337</sup>

Food prices in Damascus had risen by 93 % over the preceding 12 months by February 2020, the WFP reported.<sup>338</sup> Zaki Mehchy stated that the prices of food and beverage had increased 32.5 times since 2010. Nearly half of that increase occurred during the first five months of 2020, most notably in May.<sup>339</sup> Between the third week of March 2020 and the last week June 2020, Damascus governorate was among governorates that reported the largest increase in average food basket prices.<sup>340</sup> According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, food prices in Damascus had by February 2021 doubled since the second half of 2019. Meat prices had risen through all of 2020, prices for minced meat staying lower. The prices of livestock, sheep and chicken meat were increasing. Poultry, chicken and eggs could sometimes be hard to find at all. People would have to go to more than one shop to look for them.<sup>341</sup> By the end of January 2021, 1 kilo of beef cost 20 % of an average monthly salary at SYP 55 000.<sup>342</sup>

Cheap minced meat of unknown origin, considered not suited for human consumption, has become available in Damascus and finds its way to the markets.<sup>343</sup> Many people resort to collecting food waste from markets and restaurants. During the annual low production season, an average family would need one more salary just to cover fruits and vegetables.<sup>344</sup>

## 3.5 Housing, water and sanitation

### 3.5.1 Availability of housing

Syria is a highly urbanised society (estimated 73 %) with 37 % of the urbanised population living in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>345</sup> For more information on housing, see Section 3.3 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(February 2020\)](#).

According to a damage report by REACH, a humanitarian initiative, 'severe damage' had been inflicted on the areas Bab Touma and Midan Wastani in central Damascus; Barza al-Balad at the city's border to eastern Ghouta; and on Yarmouk, el-Faloujeh, and on Tadamon with adjacent areas to the south-east.<sup>346</sup>

Analysts Barend Wind of the University of Groningen, Netherlands, and Batoul Ibrahim of the Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic, stated in Habitat International, the demand for housing in Damascus is huge, and market supply limited. Nearly one million IDPs have settled temporarily or permanently in the city. At the same time, a large share of the residential properties in the formerly rebel-held eastern and southern outskirts is destroyed. Informal self-construction, family housing, squatting and sub-letting have increased. The large number of IDPs were increasing the pressure on housing, infrastructure and services. For people settling informally, available services

<sup>335</sup> WFP, VAM Food Security Analysis, Food Security Update: March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>336</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: SNHR], October 2020, [url](#), p. 55

<sup>337</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>338</sup> WFP, VAM (Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping) Food Security Analysis, Food Security Update: March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>339</sup> Mehchy, Z., On the edge of starvation: New alarming Consumer Price Index estimates for Syria, Conflict Research Programme Blog [Blog], 26 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>340</sup> WFP, The Socio-Economic Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic in The Syrian Arab Republic (April-June 2020), [url](#), p. 28

<sup>341</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>342</sup> Jukhadar, Q., Tsurkov, E., Kneel and Starve: Under the Watchful Eye of the Secret Police, Syrians Go Hungry, Newlines Institute, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

<sup>343</sup> Syrian Observer (The), Suspicious Meat on Sale in Damascus, [url](#); Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>344</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>345</sup> World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), p. 108

<sup>346</sup> REACH, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 25 March 2019, [url](#), p. 15

were extensively lacking. Some informal settlements have become more densely populated over the years. A number of properties have become vacant as their owners have left the city. The shortage of housing for the IDPs persists, though, since IDPs are usually squatting in poor areas. The houses becoming vacant were located in more affluent areas.<sup>347</sup> In the areas of al-Baramkeh, al-Fahameh, and Ain al-Kirsh, real estate prices were high.<sup>348</sup>

A jurist cited by Enab Baladi reported that slum areas were developing in Damascus, attributing it to poor construction and planning, high cost and bureaucracy in obtaining building permits, the absence of new regulated areas, and high land prices.<sup>349</sup>

Enab Baladi reported that overall rental levels were rising, citing a Syrian economist who stressed the depreciation of the SYP as a strong driving force. Rent revenues constitute a basic income for many families in Syria.<sup>350</sup> Rental rates had risen by more than 75 % to between SYP 200 000 and SYP 300 000 (USD 85 – 128) per month by July 2020.<sup>351</sup>

### 3.5.2 Reconstruction projects

No real reconstruction was taking place in Damascus City, according to a source interviewed by the Danish Immigration Service.<sup>352</sup> The government had not started reconstruction in the most damaged areas of Damascus. It had even not allowed houses to be rebuilt.<sup>353</sup> The GoS attempted to gain control of land and property to forcibly reorganise neighbourhoods such as Yarmouk, Qadam, Hajar al-Aswad and Jobar.<sup>354</sup> In other areas of the city, administrative and financial obstacles were holding owners back from starting repairs.<sup>355</sup> The price of building materials had risen to high levels, making it difficult for owners to rehabilitate destroyed houses.<sup>356</sup>

As assessed by the Austrian Economic Chamber, reconstruction in Syria is very limited and very localised. Projects become announced primarily for political purposes, to reaffirm the presence of the state.<sup>357</sup> According to researcher Muriel Asseburg at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), government-initiated development projects have to little degree been designed to restore buildings and neighbourhoods for their former residents, or to enable IDPs and refugees to return. Instead, reconstruction is intended to consolidate patronage networks of GoS supporters.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Wind, B. and Ibrahim, B., The war-time urban development of Damascus: How the geography- and political economy of warfare affects housing patterns, February 2020, Habitat International, [url](#), p. 11. Research paper showing how the geography- and political economy of warfare has impacted upon residential patterns and housing practices in Damascus during the civil war. The empirical results are based on satellite imagery, policy documents and a survey among spatial planning experts and students.

<sup>348</sup> Enab Baladi, House rents rise to record levels in Damascus... What are the reasons? 16 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>349</sup> Enab Baladi, Has Syrian regime government contributed to creating informal housing areas in Damascus?, 26 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>350</sup> Enab Baladi, How do employees earn their living in Damascus these days? Through legitimate or twisted ways?, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>351</sup> Enab Baladi, House rents rise to record levels in Damascus... What are the reasons? 16 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>352</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)], October 2020, para. 152

<sup>353</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Sources: Ammar Hamou, Senior Editor, and Walid Al Nofal, Reporter, Syria Direct], October 2020, paras 38, 39 [url](#)

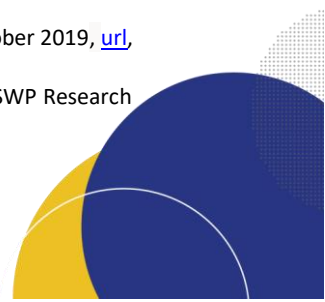
<sup>354</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)], October 2020, [url](#), para. 152

<sup>355</sup> Enab Baladi, Formalities and increased prices of building materials hinder restoration in Damascus old city, 21 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>356</sup> Enab Baladi, How do employees earn their living in Damascus these days? Through legitimate or twisted ways?, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>357</sup> WKO – Wirtschaftskammer Österreichs – Aussenwirtschaftscenter Amman, Wirtschaftsbericht Syrien, October 2019, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>358</sup> Asseburg, M., Reconstruction in Syria – Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States. SWP Research



Researchers at the Orient Policy Center William Christou and Karam Shaar assessed that short of access to foreign funds, the GoS also lacks the capacity to engage in reconstruction of any scale that would matter. Medium-to-large size reconstruction projects are expected to be put on hold.<sup>359</sup>

### 3.5.3 Legal issues affecting the housing situation

Since 2011 the GoS has issued more than 60 laws and decrees to that regulate housing, land and property rights, urban planning, and investment issues, Muriel Asserbug noted. This legislation grants the government the authority to designate development zones where private property can be expropriated.<sup>360</sup> In April 2018, the government passed Law No 10, which authorises municipalities across Syria to ‘ earmark zones within their administrative boundaries’ for redevelopment and reconstruction. This was an extension of the 2012 Decree No 66 which was aimed at redeveloping ‘unauthorized housing and informal settlements [slums] across Syria’. Under Law No 10, once the area is ‘designated’ under the law, tenants and property owners have to present ownership documents. Owners are then issued shares in line with the current estimated property value; there is little recourse to challenge estimates which are ‘likely much lower than market value’.<sup>361</sup> The law gives property owners and relatives a month to appear with paperwork to reclaim their property, many of which had been left behind due to displacement; the law states that if property was not claimed by the deadline, it could be redeveloped, causing many displaced Syrian refugees and aid groups to state that the timelines could not be met, leading to loss of their property as a result.<sup>362</sup> For more information on this law, see Section 3.3. of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(February 2020\)](#).

Barend Wind and Batoul Ibrahim asserted that the legislation had the aim of demolishing informally built neighbourhoods for redeveloping them into luxurious ‘mixed-use areas’ blending expensive offices and recreational facilities, instead of meeting the wider population’s reconstruction needs.<sup>363</sup>

Pax and Immunity Watch, a Netherlands-based NGO working to protection of civilians against acts of war, ending armed violence, and peacebuilding, asserted that the GoS was systematically dispossessing groups it considered a threat to its authority such as Palestinian refugees, while at the same time rewarding loyalists.<sup>364</sup> Palestinian refugees residing in Yarmouk, a refugee camp that has transformed into a city neighbourhood, reside on state owned land. Its residents have only been granted usage rights, not ownership. The government’s current plan for reorganising Yarmouk has not yet been clarified to the inhabitants.<sup>365</sup>

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Paper 11, SWP, July 2020, [url](#). Dr. Muriel Asserbug is Senior Fellow in the Middle East and Africa Division at SWP. This report is a peer reviewed research paper providing policy recommendations to the EU concerning reconstruction in Syria (see [url](#))

<sup>359</sup> Christou, W., and Shaar, K., 2021 budget reveals the depth of Syria’s economic woes, Atlantic Council, 1 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>360</sup> Asserbug, M., Reconstruction in Syria – Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States. SWP Research Paper 11, SWP, July 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>361</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center (CMEC), The Politics of Dispossession, 9 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>362</sup> SADC, Vengeance, Repression and Fear: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians, October 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

<sup>363</sup> Wind, B. & Ibrahim, B., The war-time urban development of Damascus: How the geography- and political economy of warfare affects housing patterns , February 2020, Habitat International, Vol. 96, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>364</sup> Pax and Immunity Watch, Violations of Housing, Land and Property Rights: An Obstacle to Peace in Syria What can International Policymakers do?, 10 March 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>365</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: International humanitarian organization in Syria] October 2020, [url](#), paras. 176, 177

### 3.5.4 Availability of water and sanitation

Sources interviewed by EASO considered the supply of drinking water through the public pipeline in Damascus is good.<sup>366</sup> The supply covers most parts of the city mainly 24/7 in the winter.<sup>367</sup> In the summer months there can be running water only 3 hours per day, but this will be enough for households to refill their stores of drinking water.<sup>368</sup> In areas where there was much destruction there was no water supply when the government took over, but it had been improving slightly. In the overcrowded neighbourhoods of Ish al-Warwar, Masaken Barzeh, Jaramana, Qudsaya, Nahr Eisha, al-Maydan, and Rukn al-Din, water could be missing for entire days and people would then have to rely upon tank trucks bringing in water.<sup>369</sup>

Bottled water costs too much for most people to buy.<sup>370</sup> The Syrian Observer reported by the end of 2020 that a barrel of water cost SYP 1 000 – 15 000 in Damascus, and that an average family would need about five barrels a day. Accordingly, the monthly cost of barrelled water would be SYP 150 000. During an unusually dry month in November/December 2020, there had been eight days of shortages and frequent interruptions in the drinking water supply in various parts of Damascus.<sup>371</sup>

The sewers system works good for all who live in functioning buildings. There are no sewers available for IDPs living in unfinished buildings and in destroyed areas.<sup>372</sup>

## 3.6 Health care

Medical care for Syrian citizens is free of charge in all government clinics and health centres.<sup>373</sup>

### 3.6.1 Availability and access to treatment and medicines

The WHO stated that Damascus hospitals have the largest availability of services to treat non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes and diabetic complications, hypertension, cardiovascular, kidney, and cancer diseases. The city has two cardiovascular specialised hospitals.<sup>374</sup>

Furthermore, 12 of a total of 15 public hospitals were classified by the WHO as ‘accessible’, while 3 were classified as ‘hard to access’.<sup>375</sup>

According to a source interviewed by the Danish Immigration Service, public healthcare services are almost for free and a vast majority of people can afford them. Also, medicines provided through the public clinics are subsidised and much cheaper than medicine offered at pharmacies. People have to go to Damascus city to receive most secondary or tertiary healthcare services such as regular check-up or operations.<sup>376</sup> Even though the public hospitals do offer surgery, surgery is not necessarily readily available there. It would take much time and bribery to get access to surgical treatment in a public

<sup>366</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>367</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021; Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>368</sup> Mehchy, Z., Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>369</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>370</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>371</sup> Syrian Observer (The), Damascus suburbs lack drinking water, 4 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>372</sup> Mehchy, Z., Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>373</sup> ILO, Syria: Social Security Programmes, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#)

<sup>374</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Annual Report, January – December 2019, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2019, [url](#), p. 44

<sup>375</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-Annual Report January - June 2020, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#), p. 9

<sup>376</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy], October 2020, [url](#), paras 88, 85, 87, 86

hospital. People would usually go to private clinics for minor issues like annual check-up. Many people would ask the wider family to help collect money to pay for treatment at a private hospital, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated.<sup>377</sup> Joseph Daher described the costs of private healthcare in the capital as ‘prohibitive’ for most people, mentioning areas such as al-Mazzeah, Damar Project, Mazraa, and the White Bridge as practicing higher prices. Clinics located on the outskirts of the city would charge less.<sup>378</sup>

Al-Jazeera pointed to security forces being present inside medical facilities, monitoring the work of the medical staff. Their presence deters many from seeking treatment, since they are widely feared.<sup>379</sup>

### 3.6.2 Healthcare facilities capacity and quality

According to the WHO, Damascus has 15 public hospitals. 12 of these are fully functioning, while 3 are partially functioning. Each hospital serves an average population of close to 122 000. Inpatient capacity has increased from originally 2 840 beds to 3 246 beds. There are 18 hospital beds per 10 000 inhabitants. There are two public hospitals offering treatment for cardiovascular diseases.<sup>380</sup> Human resources included: 53 general surgery, 805 other specialists, 2 676 resident doctors, 3 720 nurses, 151 midwives, 45 orthopaedic surgery, 20 neurological surgery, 15 emergency physicians, 42 dentists, 393 laboratory staff, 9 pharmacists, 551 health workers with university degree, 1 324 technicians and 2 953 other staff. There were no general practitioners.<sup>381</sup>

The estimated caseload at the functional public hospitals (outpatient consultations and emergency cases) from January to June 2020, was 556 560 cases. During June 2020 the public hospitals carried out 5 516 elective surgeries, and 844 emergency surgeries. 265 children with severe diseases were reported treated in public hospitals from January to June 2020. During the first half of 2020, 2 673 patients received treatment for cancer, while 1 941 patients received treatment for cardiovascular diseases. Damascus has two public hospitals offering treatment for the latter.<sup>382</sup>

According to the Syrian Ministry of Health, there are 36 private hospitals and clinics in Damascus that can treat 10-100 patients.<sup>383</sup> Hospitals in Damascus are reported as crowded and short of qualified staff and basic equipment and medicine.<sup>384</sup> Many who have contracted the COVID-19 disease have chosen to stay home.<sup>385</sup> According to Zaki Mehchy there is a lack of capacity in the health sector in Damascus. Referencing medical experts working in private clinics and public hospitals that Mehchy had spoken with, they estimated the 2020 percentage for Damascus of medical doctors who had left, at around 50 %.<sup>386</sup> Mehchy added that in 2021 a further surge in the number of medical doctors who left Syria and who used to work in Damascus was witnessed.<sup>387</sup> Joseph Daher mentioned that the lack of medical staff, especially qualified ones, has led to increasing occurrence of unexperienced doctors committing errors that sometimes even has caused the death of patients, more often in public than in private hospitals.<sup>388</sup>

<sup>377</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>378</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>379</sup> Al-Jazeera, In COVID-hit Syria, people ‘prefer to die than come to hospital, 5 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>380</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-Annual Report January - June 2020, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#), pp. 3, 5, 7, 15, 44

<sup>381</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-Annual Report January - June 2020, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#), p. 19

<sup>382</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-Annual Report January - June 2020, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#), pp. 28, 33, 41, 44

<sup>383</sup> Syrian Ministry of Health, 20 March 2020, Distribution of Private Hospitals According to Governorates, (in Arabic), [url](#)

<sup>384</sup> Al-Jazeera, In COVID-hit Syria, people “prefer to die than come to hospital, 5 October 2020, [url](#); Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, EUJ, June 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>385</sup> Al-Jazeera, In COVID-hit Syria, people “prefer to die than come to hospital, 5 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>386</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>387</sup> Mehchy, Z., Email correspondence, 25 March 2021

<sup>388</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, EUJ, June 2020, [url](#), p. 13



WHO reported that 53 out of the 61 public health centres (PHC) in Damascus were fully functional, 1 partially functional, and 7 non-functional as of the second quarter of 2020.<sup>389</sup> In terms of accessibility to patients and staff in Damascus, 54 PHCs were reported accessible, 1 hard-to-reach, and 6 inaccessible.<sup>390</sup> Another centre was reported damaged, 1 was partially damaged; while for 5 there was no report.<sup>391</sup> Among functional PHCs (53), 46 centres were equipped with electricity generators and 40 centres had refrigerators for storing vaccines.<sup>392</sup> Nurses (343) were main staff in functioning Damascus PHCs, but human resources also included: 306 practitioners, 160 specialist doctors, 119 resident doctors, 94 dentists, 85 laboratory staff, 75 midwives, 14 pharmacists, and other technicians/staff.<sup>393</sup> The estimated workload (by June 2020) was 409 096 consultations.<sup>394</sup>

### 3.6.3 Impact of COVID-19

Suhail Al-Ghazi remarked that at the start of the outbreak there were only 3-4 hospitals in the capital that could treat COVID-19 patients. Only two hospitals had ICUs. Even though some more ICUs have been opened and more bed capacity has been made available, it was still insufficient.<sup>395</sup> Researchers at the LSE Mazen Gharibah and Zaki Mehchy estimated the ICU beds with ventilators available at public and private hospitals in Damascus at 96 in total, and that the healthcare system could treat maximum 1 920 cases.<sup>396</sup> Analysts Jukhadar and Tsurkov reported that state hospitals, particularly in the Damascus area, were overwhelmed with patients and have run out of ventilators.<sup>397</sup> According to the WHO, 1 304 patients received ICU services in public hospitals during June 2020.<sup>398</sup>

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, treatment against COVID-19 could also be given at private hospitals, however with a bribe, or at such a high price that people would usually give up and resort to home treatment instead. For home treatment people would buy an oxygen cylinder and medicine in the black market, also at high prices, and then try to treat the sick at home. The pandemic was causing shortages of medicine and price increases, making an already difficult situation even more difficult. Groups had been formed on Telegram and Facebook where people could swap medicines. Even on the black market, medicines could be short in supply. In public hospitals medicine is generally short in supply, and certain types can be almost impossible to get, or a bribe would have to be paid, Suhail Al-Ghazi stated.<sup>399</sup>

UNOCHA/WHO pointed at the potential for further overstressing the healthcare capacity, citing a steady increase in COVID affected healthcare workers reported since July 2020.<sup>400</sup> More than 2 700 health care workers had fallen ill in 2020. Over 44 000 COVID-19 cases were confirmed across Syria as of mid-February 2021.<sup>401</sup> UNOCHA reported 2 908 confirmed laboratory cases in Damascus as per mid-

<sup>389</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January - June 2020, [url](#), p. 5

<sup>390</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January - June 2020, [url](#), p. 9

<sup>391</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January - June 2020, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>392</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January - June 2020, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>393</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January - June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>394</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-annual Report, Public Health Centres in the Syrian Arab Republic, January - June 2020, [url](#), p. 25

<sup>395</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>396</sup> Gharibah, M., & Mehchy, Z., COVID-19 Pandemic: Syria's Response and Healthcare Capacity, 25 March 2020, [url](#), p. 6. This report presents a rapid assessment of the capacity of healthcare system in all parts of Syria to respond to and contain a COVID-19 outbreak. This assessment was carried out using primary and secondary data; including available data from UN agencies, international organisations, and the governmental Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria, Syrian medical organisations and local health directorates. The authors have also drawn on interviews carried out with local activists, medical professionals and NGOs in different areas across the country.

<sup>397</sup> Jukhadar, Q., & Tsurkov, E., How the Syrian Regime Undermines the Response to COVID-19, Newlines Institute, 13 October.2020, [url](#)

<sup>398</sup> WHO, HeRAMS Bi-Annual Report January - June 2020, Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#), p. 35

<sup>399</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>400</sup> UNOCHA/WHO, 1 February 2021, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 23 As of 1 February 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>401</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, 2021 Needs and Response Summary, February 2021, [url](#), p. 10

February 2021.<sup>402</sup> WHO reported 15 642 confirmed cases and 1 032 confirmed deaths nationwide as by 2 March 2021.<sup>403</sup>

Various sources considered the prevalence of COVID cases in Syria seriously underreported.<sup>404</sup> In an article published in the medical journal *The Lancet*, Hamid Y. Hussain and Kasturi Sen noted that the surveillance systems in Syria are poor and that there is no standardised method for reporting infections, and that the real figures may be much higher.<sup>405</sup> A team of researchers led by Oliver Watson at the Imperial College London, estimated that the numbers of deaths announced by the Syrian government corresponded to only 1.25 % of the actual numbers, and the actual number of COVID-19 related deaths in Damascus at around 5 000 as of end of August 2020. The researchers estimated that a cumulative total of 39 % of the city's population had been affected during the pandemic as by September 2020.<sup>406</sup> UNOCHA pointed at difficulties in confirming the actual number of cases.<sup>407</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi remarked that deaths from COVID-19 could be reported as caused by other conditions instead, such as pneumonia or heart attack. This was also what would be stated in the death certificate.<sup>408</sup> Zaki Mehchy believed that the spread of the pandemic had reached a very high level in Damascus.<sup>409</sup>

Sources reported about limited effect of measures imposed to contain the pandemic.<sup>410</sup> Medical personnel in Syria interviewed by the Paris based independent journalist and researcher Asser Khattab, stated that the partial curfew and lockdown that were imposed initially in 2020, had been 'easily flouted' through slack adherence by the population, and through unprecise testing and bribery.<sup>411</sup> Zaki Mehchy opined that people actually would not care about measures unless the security agencies enforced them, pointing to the economic situation and the need to work, cultural aspects of life and the impact of years of conflict on people's psychology.<sup>412</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi pointed to crowded markets and crowded transportation in the city, indicating the public's negligence.<sup>413</sup>

In an article published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, independent economic researcher Salam Said criticised the government's management of the COVID crisis as having been 'poor' beyond preventive measures taken to limit the outbreak, and he also criticised the lack of transparent figures of infection rates and numbers of deaths.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, COVID-19 Response Update No.15 As of 16 February 2021, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>403</sup> WHO, Syrian Arab Republic, 2 March 2021, [url](#)

<sup>404</sup> UNOCHA/WHO, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 19 As of 29 September 2020, 1 February 2021, [url](#), p. 2; *The New Arab*, Medic in Syria warns of "unprecedented catastrophe" from Covid-19 amid underreporting by regime, 20 August 2020, [url](#); Tsurkov, E. & Jukhadar, Q, Ravaged by war, Syria's health care system is utterly unprepared for a pandemic, 23 April 2020, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Health Workers Lack Protection in Pandemic, 2 September 2020, [url](#); Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>405</sup> Hussein, H.Y., Sen, K., EU guidance impedes humanitarian action to prevent COVID-19 in Syria, *The Lancet*, September 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>406</sup> Watson, O. et al., Report 31: Estimating the burden of COVID-19 in Damascus, Syria: an analysis of novel data sources to infer mortality under-ascertainment, Imperial College London, 15 September 2020, [url](#), pp. 2, 4, 6, 8-9, 13

<sup>407</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic, COVID-19 Response Update No.13 As of 9 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>408</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>409</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>410</sup> Khattab, A., 'It's like Judgment Day': Syrians Recount Horror of an Underreported COVID-19 Outbreak, 11 October 2020, [url](#); Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>411</sup> Khattab, A., 'It's like Judgment Day': Syrians Recount Horror of an Underreported COVID-19 Outbreak, 11 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>412</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>413</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>414</sup> Said, S., *The COVID-19 and the Syrian Economy – Implications for Social Justice*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), July 2020, [url](#), pp. 2-3

## 3.7 Education

### 3.7.1 Legal background

Article 29 of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic stipulates that education is ‘a right guaranteed by the state, and it is free at all levels’ and that it ‘shall be compulsory until the end of basic education state’.<sup>415</sup> Education is mandatory up to 9th grade (between the ages of 6 and 15), which comprises 6 years of primary school and 3 years of lower level secondary school.<sup>416</sup> Public primary and secondary education is free.<sup>417</sup> For more information on education, Section 3.6 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(February 2020\)](#).

Private schools are regulated under ‘the same educational law as public schools’, according to a source interviewed by the DIS.<sup>418</sup>

### 3.7.2 Availability of education

Educational services are generally available throughout Damascus, sources stated.<sup>419</sup> Children who live in areas where schools have been destroyed, go to schools in neighbouring areas.<sup>420</sup> Sources interviewed separately by EASO and by the Danish Immigration Service, stated that there is a shortage of teachers.<sup>421</sup> There were not enough teachers to run enough double shift classes needed to meet needs. Some 10 % of the schools were running double shifts.<sup>422</sup> Many teachers have left the country.<sup>423</sup>

The quality of education varies from school to school, Jusoor stated.<sup>424</sup> The school children’s learning outcome was not reflected in the actual number of schools operating. Teaching quality had gone so much down that even many 7<sup>th</sup> graders could not read Arabic very well. The inflow of IDPs had caused the number of students per classroom to double from the pre-war norm.<sup>425</sup> Damascus schools have 51 pupils per classroom.<sup>426</sup> Sources cited in local media stated that the cost of schooling in private schools makes private school unaffordable for most Damascus inhabitants.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Syria, Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic – 2012, ILO, [url](#)

<sup>416</sup> Nuffic, Education System, Syria, Described and compared with the Dutch system, updated 2 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7. Nuffic is the Dutch organisation for internalisation in education, for details see [url](#)

<sup>417</sup> Nuffic, Education System, Syria, Described and compared with the Dutch system, updated 2 September 2019, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>418</sup> Denmark, DIS, Syria – The Socio-Economic Situation in Damascus City, [Sources: Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) of Mercy Corps; A humanitarian organisation in Syria], March 2019, [url](#), pp. 16, 20

<sup>419</sup> Daher, J., State Institutions and Regime Networks as Service Providers in Syria, June 2020, [url](#), p. 14; Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Jusoor for Studies] October 2020, [url](#), para. 121

<sup>420</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), para. 121

<sup>421</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), para. 121

<sup>422</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; Asseburg, M., Reconstruction in Syria – Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States. SWP Research Paper 11, SWP, July 2020, [url](#)

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<sup>424</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, [url](#), para. 121

<sup>425</sup> Zaki Mehchy, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>426</sup> NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file, p. 35

<sup>427</sup> Syrian Observer (The), Syria’s Private Schools: a Way to Get Rich Quick, 23 September 2016, [url](#); Zaman Al-Wasl, Syria’s private schools reveal increase in class gap, 1 October 2017, [url](#)

### 3.7.2.1 Number of educational facilities

The Syrian official news agency SANA reported in September 2019 that the number of schools in Damascus was 880, providing education for over 361 000 students in ‘primary, education and vocational schools’.<sup>428</sup> Zaki Mehchy considered that number fairly accurate.<sup>429</sup>

### 3.7.3 Access to education

The GoS is the main provider of education in most areas of Syria, with the support of international NGOs and UN agencies in some areas. It has the responsibility for education services in Damascus and other governorates. For more information on education, Section 3.6 of the [EASO COI Report: Syria - Socio-economic situation: Damascus City \(February 2020\)](#).

There are schools in all areas in Damascus that are providing education to children according to sources interviewed by DIS.<sup>430</sup> Other sources interviewed by DIS stated that people are entering the city from Rural Damascus daily to receive education.<sup>431</sup> Access to school in one’s own area of residence in Damascus city is mostly good, Zaki Mehchy stated. Most school children would not have to cross between different areas to reach school.<sup>432</sup>

UNRWA provides education services to Palestinian refugee students from grade 1 to 9. Most of the 103 UNRWA-managed schools in Syria are located around Rural Damascus and Damascus. Several UNRWA schools were damaged or destroyed during the conflict. There were 50 000 students in those that remained open, from grade 1 to 9. It was easier for those residing in camps to access UNRWA education than for those living outside, as most of UNRWA’s services are located nearby or inside camps.<sup>433</sup>

### Enrolment rates

The World Bank assessed in 2020, that based on 2018 estimates almost 95 % of the school-age population in Damascus was enrolled in schools. Damascus thus had the highest enrolment rate of the Syrian governorates.<sup>434</sup> Zaki Mehchy commented that children living in Rural Damascus but going to school in Damascus city, are also included in the official statistics for Damascus city, thus creating

<sup>428</sup> SANA, “12700 Schools Open Tomorrow to Welcome Students as the New School Year Begins,” (in Arabic), 1 September 2019, [url](#)

<sup>429</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>430</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Sources: Ammar Hamou, Senior Editor, and Walid Al Nofal, Reporter, Syria Direct], October 2020, [url](#), para. 51

<sup>431</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Rami Abdurrahman, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)], October 2020, [url](#), para. 210; Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Omran Center for Strategic Studies], October 2020, [url](#), para. 127; Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: Jusoor for Studies], October 2020, para. 121.

About the sources: The website of the Omran Center for Strategic Studies states that the Center “was established in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It is a research institution focusing on political affairs, local administration, and development sectors in Syria. It assesses complex set of data and publishes studies and policy briefs addressing relevant actors and institutions working on Syrian affairs” (Omran Studies, About us [url](#)).

The website of Jusoor for Studies states: Jusoor 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. [Jusoor] aims 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](#)

<sup>432</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>433</sup> Denmark, DIS, Country Report Syria: Security and socio-economic situation in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus [Source: International humanitarian organization in Syria], October 2020, [url](#), para. 186

<sup>434</sup> World Bank, The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020, [url](#), pp. 131-132. The estimates rely on UNICEF estimates for 2016/2017.

erroneous numbers. Based on official 2019 figures available to Mehchy, his own estimate would indicate an enrolment rate for basic education Damascus at about 63 %.<sup>435</sup> The system for monitoring dropouts is poor, making the accurate dropout rate unknown. Many enrolled children do outside work during school time, contributing to the low literacy rate among 13-14 year olds. Many families have to take their children out of school to help cover family expenses, sources reported.<sup>436</sup> School enrolment rates could be understood in connection with child labour, which is widespread, an international humanitarian organisation working in Syria remarked.<sup>437</sup> Families typically send their boys, not the girls, out to work.<sup>438</sup> Girls then show slightly higher school attendance rates than boys.<sup>439</sup> There are no accurate numbers available for Damascus households where child labour occurs.<sup>440</sup>

## Impact of COVID-19

With the pandemic, many schools closed in the spring of 2020. Teaching was conducted online instead.<sup>441</sup> Schools re-opened when the new school year started on 13 September 2020.<sup>442</sup> Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that during the closure, remote teaching had been provided mainly via TV, on a certain TV channel (Syria Education) that was organising the classes. The children could interact through calls. The same teaching as on TV was also provided on the internet. Once the school year finished in August, the remote teaching was stopped as the government decided to reopen schools.<sup>443</sup> UNICEF stated that online teaching had been made available 'on some occasions'.<sup>444</sup>

Zaki Mehchy assessed that in the schools, no further measures to counter the COVID had been taken after the initial closure.<sup>445</sup> The pandemic has increased school dropout, sources reported.<sup>446</sup>

According to UNWRA, some 49 145 students from grades 1 to 9 were enrolled in their 103 schools for the scholastic year 2019/2020. UNRWA educational facilities were closed on 13 March 2020, as part of the government's COVID-19 response. UNWRA then launched a self-learning programme, in which learning material was circulated through e-mail and instant messaging platforms, and hardcopies provided to around 10 000 students in areas without internet connectivity.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Mehchy developed his estimate as follows: The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimated the total population in Damascus at about 2 million inhabitants in 2019. Based on previous censuses, children aged 8-15 forms around 22 % of total population. In actual numbers there would then be 440 000 children in 2019 at the age of basic education. In the same year, the Central Bureau of Statistics showed that the total number of students enrolled in basic education in Damascus was about 275 000 students. Based on these figures the school enrolment rate (for basic education) can be estimated at about 63 % (275 000 / 440 000). Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>436</sup> UNICEF, Whole of Syria: Humanitarian Situation Report: Mid-Year 2020, 2 August 2020; [url](#), p. 21; Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021; NRC, 24 under 24, Insight Paper: Voices of Syria's youth, August 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>437</sup> An international humanitarian organisation working in Syria, Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>438</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>439</sup> NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file, p. 36

<sup>440</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>441</sup> UNICEF, UNICEF's innovative distant-learning method provides education to children during lockdown, 22 June 2020, [url](#); Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>442</sup> UNOCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 – Humanitarian Update No. 18, 17 September 2020, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>443</sup> Al-Ghazi, S., Microsoft Teams interview, 3 February 2021

<sup>444</sup> UNICEF, UNICEF's innovative distant-learning method provides education to children during lockdown, 22 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>445</sup> Mehchy, Z., Microsoft Teams interview, 17 February 2021

<sup>446</sup> NGO Joint Research Report; Syria Solutions Analysis: An Assessment of Durable Solutions Conditions at the Whole of Syria Level; January 2021; private document held on file, p. 36; North Press Agency, Coronavirus and poor living conditions increase dropout rate in Syria's Damascus, 27 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>447</sup> UNWRA, Syria regional crisis emergency appeal progress report for the reporting period 01 January – 30 June 2020, 2020 (n.d.), [url](#), p.11

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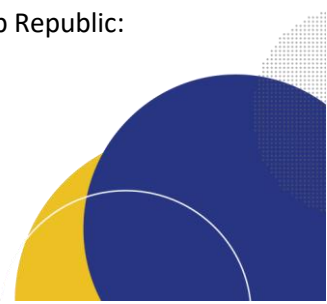
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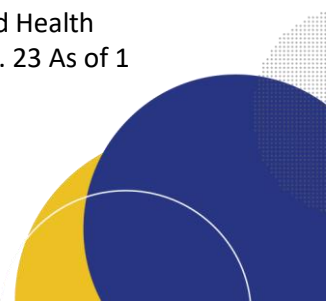
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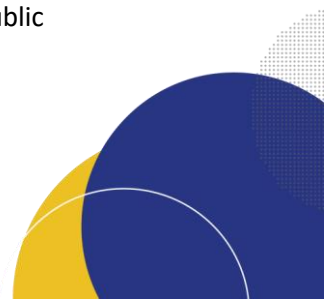
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## Annex II: Terms of Reference

This report should focus on Damascus city. The report should address the following key socio-economic indicators: housing, food security, water and sanitation, health care, education, livelihood opportunities such as employment. Internal mobility issues relating to accessibility (travel and admittance) are also to be included.

- City overview
  - Demographics, ethno-religious composition
  - Humanitarian situation and assistance
  - Displacement and return
- Internal mobility
  - Airports and flights connections
  - Freedom of movement, including impact of ethnic/religious background, place of origin, age, (perceived) affiliation with opposition groups and being on wanted lists, and Covid-19
  - Civil documentation
  - Travel by road and through checkpoints
    - Information on no. and location of checkpoints, procedures at checkpoints
    - Information on accessibility from Damascus airport to the city
    - Profiles of persons more/less scrutinised
    - Restrictions on access and return to certain areas
    - Requirements for settling in Damascus
- Economic overview
  - Economic situation
  - Impact of economic sanctions
  - Impact of Covid-19
- Employment
- Poverty
- Food security
- Housing, water, and sanitation
- Health care
  - Impact of Covid-19
- Education





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of the European Union

doi: 10.2847/957835