

Syria

Issues Regarding Military Service

COI report based on written sources



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

The Danish
Immigration Service

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Disclaimer

This brief report is written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.¹ The report is based on a variety of written sources such as COI- and fact finding reports, official websites of the Syrian government and media outlets.

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

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

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

¹ European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO), *EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology*, June 2019, [url](#)

Introduction and methodology

This brief report has been written with the aim of providing updated information on a number of issues regarding military service in Syria.

The report focuses on the following issues: exemption from military service by paying exemption fee, prevalence of conscripting the only male child, prevalence of recruiting men over 42 years of age, possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion for family members of draft evaders and deserters and joining the pro-government militias as an alternative to military service.

The report is the product of a research into available open source information from a number of written sources, including COI- and fact finding reports, official websites of the Syrian government and media outlets. It should be noted that a great part of the information found dates back to the period before the summer of 2018. It has particularly been difficult to find information on how the Syrian Military Service Law and different decrees and circulars issued have been implemented.

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called to the changeable and unstable situation in Syria and the fact that the information provided may quickly become outdated.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

The research and editing of this report was finalised on 18 October 2019.

The report can be accessed from the website of DIS, www.newtodenmark.dk, and thus is available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

Abbreviations

COI	Country of Origin Information
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
IS	Islamic State
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
NDF	National Defence Forces (NDF)
ToR	Terms of reference

1. Overview of military service in Syria

According to the Syrian Military Law, all Syrian men, including registered Palestinians from Syria, between the ages 18 to 42 are required to serve in the military for a period of 18 to 21 months, depending on their level of education.² The Military Service Law stipulates that deferrals have to be renewed every year and that referrals are only permitted for specific categories of people, for instance certain students and individuals with specialised educational degrees and people with certain temporary health conditions. The law also permits certain categories of people to be exempted from military service, including men who are the only male child to their parents, unfit people due to health reasons, and those who pay an exemption fee. However, men who evade or desert military service face financial and legal repercussions.³

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, the Syrian government's main issue with regards to the draft was to provide manpower in order to face armed rebel groups. The number of men who avoided the compulsory and reserve military service increased significantly. A large number of males of military age either fled the country, joined the armed opposition or went into hiding.⁴ In order to fill the manpower shortage, the Syrian government took a number of different steps. It established pro-regime armed militias, actively searched for deserters and draft evaders and extended the military service beyond the mandatory conscription period.⁵ Until the end of 2018, no one serving in the military since 2011 was demobilized. Those who completed their period of compulsory service had to continue to serve as reservists.^{6 7}

The Syrian government has amended the Syrian Military Service Law multiple times during the Syrian conflict,⁸ most recently in July 2019,⁹ in order to increase the number of recruits. Moreover, former opposition-held areas retaken by the government in the summer of 2018 gave the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) the opportunity to recruit a huge number of new conscripts.¹⁰

2. Exemption from military service by paying exemption fee

As previously mentioned, the Syrian Military Service Law permits Syrian young men, including registered Palestinians from Syria, of military draft age 18-42 to pay a fee ('*Badal al-Naqdi*') to be exempted from compulsory military service and not be called up again. However, this only applies to people residing

² Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat: Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrulling, utsettelse og fritak*, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 7

³ TIMEP, *Brief: Conscription Law*, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁴ In 2014 to 2015 the number of personnel was estimated to have reduced by approximately 50 % (Sweden, Migrationsverket and Finland, FIS, *SYRIA: MILITARY SERVICE, NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES, ARMED GROUPS SUPPORTING SYRIAN REGIME AND ARMED OPPOSITION*, 23 August 2016, [url](#), p. 5)

⁵ Norway, Landinfo, *Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁶ Norway, Landinfo, *Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 5

⁷ For information on current trends with regard to demobilisation, see section 4

⁸ Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 27

⁹ SANA, [الرئيس الأسد يصدر مرسوماً تشريعياً بتعديل مواد من قانون خدمة العلم] *[President Assad issues a Legislative Decree [no.12] amending articles of the Military Service Law]*, 14 July 2019, [url](#). The amendments included more restrictions on the permitted maximum age to start different levels of education. In addition, further restrictions were stipulated regarding the number of study years in the different levels of education during which students are permitted to defer military service.

¹⁰ For more information, see Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat, Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#)

abroad.¹¹ On the website of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, the rules and conditions for paying the exemption fee are outlined in detail. It stipulates that men who have been residing outside Syria, in an Arab as well as a non-Arab country for no less than four continuous years can pay an amount of 8,000 USD to be exempted from military service. The deadline for the conscript to pay the fee is three months after being called up for conscription. The deadline can be extended by two more days if the conscript has been residing outside Syria for up to five years. But in this case he will have to pay the exemption fee plus 25,000 SYP (about 50 USD). In order to be exempted, the conscript who has lived abroad for more than five years and who has not paid the exemption fee within the deadline, will have to pay 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) for every year that exceeded the age of 18 plus the exemption fee.¹²

In addition, a conscript of compulsory military service age, who was born in an Arab or non-Arab country and has been residing there until he turned 18 years, can pay an exemption fee of 2,500 USD until he has turned 25 years of age. A visit of up to three months to Syria does not count as a disruption of a person's residence in the foreign country. For every year a person exceeds the age of 18 without enlisting for military service or paying the exemption fee, that individual will have to pay 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) plus the exemption fee. A Syrian male who has exceeded the age of 25 will have to pay 8,000 USD to be exempted from military service.¹³

	Syrian men who have lived abroad for no less than four continuous years.	Syrian men under 25 years of age, born in an Arab or non-Arab country with continuous residency in a foreign country until the age of 18.
Exemption fee to be payed:	8,000 USD.	2,500 USD
Deadlines for paying the exemption fee:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The deadline for paying the exemption fee is three months after being called up for conscription. This deadline can be extended by two more days if <u>the conscripted person has been residing outside Syria for up to five years.</u> In this case the person will have to pay a fine of 25,000 SYP (about 50 USD) on top of the 8000 USD exemption fee. A person who has lived abroad for more than five years, and failed to pay the exemption within the deadline, has to pay a fine of 50,000 SYP (about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For every year a person exceeds the age of 18 without enlisting for military service or paying the exemption fee, the individual will have to pay 50,000 SYP (about 100 USD) on top of the exemption fee. A Syrian male who has exceeded the age of 25 will have to pay 8,000 USD to be exempted from military service.

¹¹ Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 27-28

¹² Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, *البدل النقدي* [Exemption Fee], [url](#)

¹³ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, *البدل النقدي* [Exemption Fee], [url](#). In an amendment of article 97a of Decree No. 30 issued in November 2017, it was stipulated that men who have not been exempted from military service and who have exceeded the military service age (42 years) are obliged to pay an exemption fee of 8,000 USD ('*badal fawat alkhedma*') within three months of turning 42 years. Men who do not pay the fee within the specified period will be imprisoned for a year and obliged to pay additional 200 USD for every year exceeding the deadline provided that the fees paid do not exceed 2,000 USD in total. In addition, those who have exceeded the military service age and have not paid 8,000 USD will have their property confiscated temporarily until they have paid the outstanding fee (Denmark, DIS and DRC, *SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p. 28)

	100 USD) for every year in which the person failed to enlist, since the age of 18. The fine is to be paid on top of the 8,000 USD exemption fee.	
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According to both the Chief of Immigration and Passports Department, General Naji Numeir, whom DIS interviewed in November 2018, and the Director of the Consular Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Mawla al-Nakri, who was interviewed by the local Syrian pro-government newspaper *Economy2Day* in December 2018, persons who left Syria legally, as well as those who left illegally, can be exempted from military service by paying the 8,000 USD exemption fee.¹⁴

In two articles published in October 2018 in the local Syrian pro-government newspaper *Alwatan* and the Lebanese electronic news website *Almodon*, it reads that the Syrian authorities cancelled the requirement for security approvals of individuals who wanted to pay the exemption fee.^{15 16}

However, according to Mawla al-Nakri, those who exited illegally need to reconcile their situation before they can be exempted.¹⁷ Al-Naki's statement is in accordance with an announcement on the website of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, according to which persons who exited illegally, including those who need to sort out their military situation, are required to apply to reconcile their situation at the Syrian Embassy in the country of residence or at the nearest Syrian Embassy.^{18 19}

2.1. The procedure and required documents

Besides paying the exemption fee by bank transfer, check or cash, a person needs to go through an administrative process that includes providing documents and filling in forms in order to receive an official document which states that he is exempted from military service.²⁰ According to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, this process can be completed by the conscript in the foreign country of residence. The documents that are required in order to be permitted to pay the exemption fee are:

¹⁴ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p. 29; Economy2Day, [كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البدل] *Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee*, 15 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵ Alwatan, [إلغاء الموافقات على وكالات الزواج والطلاق وتنبيه الملكية وجوازات السفر] *Cancellation of approvals for marriage, divorce, confirmation of ownership and issuing passports*, 21 October 2018, [url](#); Almodon, [الإلغاء الموافقات الأمنية لوكالات الخارجية] *Cancellation of security approvals for foreign agencies*, 22 October 2018, [url](#)

¹⁶ For information on security approvals, see Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 19-20; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat, Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-12

¹⁷ Economy2Day, [كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البدل] *Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee*, 15 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, [وضع تسوية وضع] *Reconciling ones situation* [url](#)

¹⁹ For information on security approvals and reconciling one's situation, see Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 19-20; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat, Syria: Myndighetsutøvelse i gjenerobrede områder*, 20 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-12

²⁰ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: *FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Norway, Landinfo, *Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 12

- a Residence Document (i.e. a document proving one's legal residence in the foreign country in question),
- a written application to an authority in the military directorate or division,
- an Entry and Exit Statement, and
- a copy of the Syrian Civil Registry Statement.²¹

The Residence Document should be obtained from a Syrian representation or from the local authorities in the country of residence. The document should include the start date of residency, current date of residency (and end date of residency if feasible) and the dates of the periods that the conscript has not been living in the country of residence. Conscripts that have resided in more than one country can either provide a residency document from each country or, if possible, from the current country of residence can include the periods of his previous and current countries of residence. In countries with no diplomatic representation of the Syrian Arab Republic, the conscript will have to provide a Residence Document issued by the local authorities, or provide other documents that prove his residency in the foreign country, such as a copy of residence permit or a copy of a work contract.²²

Additionally, the conscript, one of his family members or his legal representative should send a written application to the General Directorate for Recruitment or to the recruitment division where the applicant is to report, in which he expresses his wish to pay the exemption fee.²³

Moreover, the conscript needs to provide an Entry and Exit Statement, which includes the dates of his entry to and exit from Syria. This statement is issued by the Department of Immigration and Passports or one of its branches.²⁴

The applicant is also required to hand in a document which includes the obligatory health examinations. In addition, the applicant has to hand in a copy of the Syrian Civil Registry Statement (Arabic: *ikhraj qayd men al-sejel al-madani*).²⁵

²¹ Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي [Exemption Fee], [url](#). The Syrian Embassies and Consulate have the forms that are required to be filled in. Syrians in Denmark are referred to book an appointment with the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm in order to complete the Exemption Fee process. The forms are also available on the website of the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, *Syrian Citizens Affairs*, [url](#)

²² Conscripts, who are born outside Syria and want to pay the exemption fee, also have to provide certified copies of the primary, preparatory and secondary school certificates. Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي, [Exemption Fee], [url](#))

²³ Conscripts, who are born outside Syria and want to pay the exemption fee, also have to provide certified copies of the primary, preparatory and secondary school certificates. Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي, [Exemption Fee], [url](#))

²⁴ Conscripts, who are born outside Syria and want to pay the exemption fee, also have to provide certified copies of the primary, preparatory and secondary school certificates. Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي, [Exemption Fee], [url](#))

²⁵ Conscripts, who are born outside Syria and want to pay the exemption fee, also have to provide certified copies of the primary, preparatory and secondary school certificates. Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, البدل النقدي, [Exemption Fee], [url](#))

2.2. Implementation

In the DIS and DRC fact finding report published in February 2019, sources stated that by paying the 8,000 USD fee it was possible in practice to be exempted from military service and not be called up to serve in the military any more. The sources knew of individuals who had been exempted from military service by paying the fee. Two sources mentioned that no one among those, whom they knew to have paid the fee and been exempted, had been called up for military service later on. Another source knew of cases of young men who fled to the Gulf States during the Syrian crisis and who were exempted by paying the fee and did not face any problem with the Syrian government upon return.²⁶

According to a source interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service in April 2018, there were cases of Druze and Sunni family members of known opposition members who had paid the exemption fee and returned back to Syria. These persons safely moved around in Syria as they pleased. Another source told the Finnish Immigration Service that the exemption was also respected by the pro-government militias.²⁷

According to some sources, the Syrian government is in need of foreign currency, which is why it has eased the process of paying the exemption fee.²⁸ In an article in the pro-government news website, *Economy2Day* published 15 December 2018, the Director of the Consular Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Mawla al-Nakri, stated that the number of people who wanted to pay the exemption fee had increased by 50 % within the previous two months. Al-Nakri added that the number of persons, who had applied to reconcile their situation because of their illegal exit from Syria in order to pay the exemption fee, had increased tenfold recently. Another official in the Department of Immigration and Passports stated that the department was issuing 50 Entry and Exit Statements each day for persons who wanted the statements in order to pay the exemption fee.²⁹

In a statement to the pro-government news source *Alwatan* in August 2019, a judicial source said that there had been an increase in the number of people who had paid the exemption fee since the cancellation of the security approval in October 2018.³⁰ The independent Syrian news source *Enab Baladi* reported in September 2019 that the number of young Syrian men making appointments at the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul to pay the military service exemption fee had increased dramatically in the last period.³¹

²⁶ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p.28

²⁷ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, *Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.12

²⁸ Almodan, [الإلغاء الموقّعات الأمنية للوكالات الخارجية], *Cancellation of security approvals for foreign agencies*, 22 October 2018, [url](#); Nedaa Syria, النظام السوري ينشر تفاصيل جديدة عن بدل الخدمة العسكرية, [Syrian regime publishes new details on military service [exemption fee]], 5 May 2019, [url](#); Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, *Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.8; Norway, Landinfo, *Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders*, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p.12;

²⁹ Economy2Day, كل ما يجب أن تعرفه عن دفع البدل, [Everything you Need to Know about Exemption Fee], 15 December 2018, [url](#).

³⁰ Alwatan, زيادة في إصدار جوازات السفر من قبل المغتربين, [An increase in the issuance of passports by expatriates], 19 August 2019, [url](#)

³¹ Enab Baladi, *Military Service Exemption Fee: Expensive Return Ticket To Homeland*, 2 September 2019, [url](#)

3. Prevalence of conscripting the only male child

The Syrian Military Service Law stipulates that a person, who is the only male child to his parents, his mother, or his father, can be exempted from military service. This also applies if the parents of the only male child are divorced, or if one or both parents are deceased.³² In addition, an only son will be exempted if he has half-brothers or has become an only male child as a result of the death of one or more of his brothers.³³

During the Syrian Civil War, minor amendments have been made to the exemption of the only male child.³⁴ Instead of renewing his exemption every two years, a person has to renew the exemption every year.³⁵ The Syrian authorities want to ensure that the parents of the only son, if they are still living, have not got another male child during the previous year. Therefore the person is required to renew his exemption until his mother reaches the age where she cannot give birth to a child (approximately 50 years).³⁶

According to Middel East Institute, by the end of 2017, the number of offensive-capable fighters in the SAA was no more than 25,000 — the majority of which were in the Republican Guard and 4th Division units.³⁷ In a fact finding report by DIS and DRC published in August 2017, one source stated that the pool of recruits to the army had diminished as the conflict had decimated the skeleton of the SAA. This is why the government started to recruit more broadly, including persons who were the only male child of their family and who had previously been exempted from military service.³⁸ Another source anticipated that only male child of a family who had been exempted from military service were also at risk of being drafted to military service.³⁹

However, a source interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service in May 2018 stated that the status of being the only son was a valid reason for an exemption and was respected to some level.⁴⁰

The exemption may be refused if a person does not comply with the given application deadlines and consequently the person may have to serve in the military.⁴¹

³² Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Defense, الوحيد [Only male child], [url](#)

³³ Norway, Landinfo, Temanotat: Syria: Militærtjeneste – innrulling, utsettelse og fritak, 14 November 2017, [url](#), p. 19

³⁴ Norway, Landinfo, Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 9

³⁵ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8; Norway, Landinfo, Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p. 9

³⁶ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

³⁷ Middle East Institute: The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth, 18 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁸ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017, August 2017, [url](#), p. 96

³⁹ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017, August 2017, [url](#), p. 108

⁴⁰ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 8

⁴¹ Norway, Landinfo, Report, Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders, 3 January 2018, [url](#), p.9

DIS could not find information on whether there have been cases of only male child being conscripted since May 2018.

4. Prevalence of recruiting men over 42 years of age

The Syrian Military Service Law stipulates that men between the age of 18 and 42 are obliged to serve compulsory military service and reserve duty. According to a source interviewed by Finnish Immigration Service in April 2018, the age limit for compulsory service were dependent on the government's mobilising efforts and local developments rather than on universal draft.⁴² In the same report as well as in the joint fact finding report by DIS and DRC from 2017, sources stated that in practice, the age limit for military service and reserve duty had increased to include people in their late 40's and early 50's.⁴³

After the summer of 2018 when the Syrian government retook East Ghouta and territories in south of Syria from opposition groups, the security situation in Syria changed, which led to several developments regarding military service.

In October 2018, a circular included a decision to erase names for reservists wanted for active duty.⁴⁴ However, in November, the largest reserve campaign in the country in the past seven years was initiated in which about 500,000 to 800,000 men, including all those born before 1976, were called up as reservists and their names were put on a list of wanted reservist.⁴⁵ Consequently, in Damascus, this meant that many industrial and commercial facilities were disrupted by the lack of male employees who went into hiding or were taken to military service. People loyal to the Syrian government met this campaign with anger.⁴⁶

However, the reservists, who had been serving more than five years, were demobilized from the SAA in December 2018.⁴⁷ Additionally, on 31 January 2019, the Syrian government discharged reservists and exempted evaders that were born before 1977.⁴⁸

⁴² Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.6

⁴³ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.6; Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017, August 2017, [url](#), pp. 12-13

⁴⁴ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, Report based on interviews between 16 to 27 November 2018 in Beirut and Damascus, February 2019, [url](#), p. 29

⁴⁵ Almodon, [الترابع عن مرسوم الاحتياط: "التحالف العلوي" ينتصر], Undoing the reserve decree: the "Alawi Alliance" wins, 9 December 2018, [url](#); Almodon, [A Russian order to exclude all reservists born in 1981... "without hustle"], 7 February 2019, [url](#); 7al, [The biggest demobilization campaign in Syria... and a decision to exempt anyone over the age of 38 from reserve], 6 February 2019, [url](#). 7al informed that the wanted list of reservists included men in their late seventies (7al is a Syrian news source that covers the local, regional and international news. 7al states that it is an independent news source with no stated political agenda and it describes its purpose as providing non-biased news and objective analyses. It is financed by Syrian Expatriates; 7al, لماذا حل؟ [Why use 7al?], [url](#))

⁴⁶ 7al, [أكبر حملة تسريح في سوريا... وقرار بإعفاء كل من تجاوز عمره 38 عاماً من الاحتياط], The biggest demobilization campaign in Syria... and a decision to exempt anyone over the age of 38 from reserve], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷ RFI, Des centaines d'officiers syriens retourneront à la vie civile début 2019, 16 December 2018, [url](#); 7al, [وقرار بإعفاء كل من تجاوز عمره 38 عاماً من الاحتياط], The biggest demobilization campaign in Syria... and a decision to exempt anyone over the age of 38 from reserve], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

One week later, on 6 February 2019, SANA, the official news agency of the Syrian government, reported on the issuance of an administrative circular stipulating the exemption of all men born before 1981 who were required for reserve service. The administrative circular also included ending the retention of the enrolled officers and civilians who were born before 1981.⁴⁹ In other words, demobilization was ordered to include all evaders and the reservists serving in the military who were born before 1981.⁵⁰ The date for the implementation of the circular was 15 February 2019.⁵¹ DIS could not find information on how this circular is being implemented in practice.

5. Joining pro-government militias as an alternative to military service

Recruitment to pro-government militias generally takes place on a voluntary basis⁵² through family and other local informal networks.⁵³

However, according to a source consulted by the Finnish Immigration Service in May 2018, in cases where government employees have been required to defend their local positions because of the active fighting in the area, there has been an element of coercion.⁵⁴ In addition, when the government regained control over areas, which previously were controlled by opposition groups, men of fighting age who did not want to be evacuated to Idlib had to choose between being conscripted into the SAA or to join pro-government militias.⁵⁵ Many of these men were recruited to the Fifth Corps later on. The Fifth Corps is an assemblage of militias incorporated into the official military structure in early 2016 as a distinct army

⁴⁸ Almodon, "أمر روسي لاستبعاد مواليد 1981 من الاحتياط... بلا صخب" [A Russian order to exclude all reservists born in 1981... "without hustle"], 7 February 2019, [url](#); 7al.net, "أكبر حملة تسريح في سوريا... وقرار بإعفاء كل من تجاوز عمره 38 عاماً من الاحتياط" [The biggest demobilization campaign in Syria... and a decision to exempt anyone over the age of 38 from reserve], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "القيادة العامة للجيش تستبعد الاحتياطيين المدعوين من مواليد 1981 وما قبل من دعوات الاحتياط" [The General Army Command Exempts the called up reserves born in 1981 and earlier], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰ A member of the Syrian parliament said to a pro-government TV-channel that the administrative circular was issued to lessen the anger of the civilians. Moreover, he stated that the central fights have ended, and therefore there was no need for a large number of manpower; 7al, "أكبر حملة تسريح في سوريا... وقرار بإعفاء كل من تجاوز عمره 38 عاماً من الاحتياط" [The biggest demobilization campaign in Syria... and a decision to exempt anyone over the age of 38 from reserve], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

⁵¹ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), "القيادة العامة للجيش تستبعد الاحتياطيين المدعوين من مواليد 1981 وما قبل من دعوات الاحتياط" [The General Army Command excludes called up reservists born in 1981 and earlier], 6 February 2019, [url](#)

⁵² Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan*, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), p.16; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser*, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.14; Sweden, Lifos, *Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst*, version 3.0, maj 2017 [url](#), 54; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: *FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018 [url](#), p.16

⁵³ Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser*, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.15

⁵⁴ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: *FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.16

⁵⁵ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan*, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), p.16

corps.⁵⁶ The Fifth Corps has been the main alternative to the regular military service, especially in the reconciled areas which were retaken by the government in 2017 and 2018.⁵⁷

Whilst some sources state that there is a certain social pressure from the local community to join militias and defend one's home area, others mention that the recruitment to the militias is primarily based on loyalty, trust, local connection, family relationship and friendship.⁵⁸

Those who are recruited to pro-government militias are paid a monthly salary and they usually get a work contract which is valid for one year or more. When joining a militia, the militia leader usually confiscates the individual's civil ID card in return for a militia ID card in the same way as it is the case for people who are conscripted to the SAA. The type of militia ID card varies depending on the militia.⁵⁹

Although it is not stipulated by the Syrian Military Service Law that a person can do military service in other places than the regular SAA, it is possible in practice to join and serve in pro-government militias to avoid military service.⁶⁰ This is seen by many as the preferred option to that of the SSA.⁶¹ By presenting their militia contracts to the military recruitment office, militia recruits can have their military service postponed, which is one of the most important incentives for many young recruits to join the militias.⁶²

Other incentives mentioned by the sources to join the local militias are the regular monthly salary and the possibility to stay and defend one's home area as opposed to military service where people often are deployed to other parts of the country. In addition, being part of a militia gives the opportunity to earn money through illegal activities such as demanding bribes at checkpoints.⁶³

⁵⁶ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.1

⁵⁷ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p.8

⁵⁸ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), p.16; Norway, Landinfo, Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.15; Sweden, Lifos, Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst, version 3.0, maj 2017 [url](#), 54; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018, [url](#), pp. 16. 19-20

⁵⁹ Norway, Landinfo, Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.15; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018 [url](#), p.16

⁶⁰ Norway, Landinfo, Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.15; Sweden, Lifos, Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst, version 3.0, maj 2017 [url](#), 54; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Country Information Service, SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government, 14 December 2018 [url](#), p.8

⁶¹ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#),

⁶² Norway, Landinfo, Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.15

⁶³ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in

Although the militias tend to defend their own areas, there have been cases of militias being deployed to other areas together with army divisions.⁶⁴ The militias have also been deployed to the frontline, and those who volunteer in offensive operations receive the highest pay as a reward for the risk.⁶⁵

6. Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion for family members

In a joint fact finding mission in 2017 conducted by DIS and DRC, several sources informed the delegation that family members of draft evaders and deserters risked being subjected to pressure and interrogations from the authorities and at times detention.⁶⁶

Some sources emphasized that family members of high-profiled deserters faced a higher risk of being targeted by the authorities. According to one source, family members to deserters who were wanted for e.g. having killed army personnel or having been part of an operation against the army would be put under pressure, for instance by bringing a family member in for questioning or interrogation, often a father or brother.⁶⁷

In the same report, an international organisation stated that a person's act of evasion or desertion would not in itself have consequences for his family members. Families of high-profiled members of opposition groups, however, would be closely monitored by the authorities. The source knew of people in Damascus with relatives fighting in opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta who due to the activities of their relatives had been pressured to provide information about them when addressing themselves to the authorities, for example in connection with passport issuance. Another source similarly stated that only family members of deserters or evaders who had actively been fighting against the government were at risk of ill-treatment.⁶⁸

Based on consultations with sources between 2014 and 2017, Lifos reported in 2017 that family members of deserters, particularly those with a high profile, could face pressure and even jail as a measure to force deserters to report.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), p.16; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat: Syria: Regimelojale militser*, 2 November 2017, [url](#), p.15; Sweden, Lifos, *Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst*, version 3.0, maj 2017 [url](#), 54

⁶⁵ Sweden, Lifos, *Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst*, version 3.0, maj 2017 [url](#), 54

⁶⁶ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan*, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), p.16

⁶⁷ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan*, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), pp. 14-15

⁶⁸ Denmark, DIS and DRC, SYRIA, *Recruitment Practices in Government-controlled Areas and in Areas under Opposition Control, Involvement of Public Servants and Civilians in the Armed Conflict and Issues Related to Exiting Syria, Report based on interviews in Beirut, Lebanon and Amman, Jordan*, 26 March to 5 April 2017 [url](#), pp. 14-15

⁶⁹ Sweden, Lifos, *Reguljär och irreguljär syrisk militärtjänst*, version 3.0, maj 2017 [url](#), 46

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DIS could not find information on whether draft evasion and desertion have had consequences for family members since 2017 where the latest report on the issue was published.

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Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

1. Exemption from military service by paying exemption fee
2. Prevalence of conscripting the only male child
3. Prevalence of recruiting of men over 42 years of age
4. Possible consequences of draft evasion and desertion for family members
5. Joining the pro-government militias as an alternative to military service