



Fact-Finding Mission Report

**SYRIA: MILITARY SERVICE, NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES, ARMED GROUPS
SUPPORTING SYRIAN REGIME AND ARMED OPPOSITION**

Helsinki, August 23, 2016

Public Report



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Disclaimer

This report, written by the Country Information Service of the Finnish Immigration Service was written according to the EU Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information. The report draws on carefully selected sources that are referenced in the report. Information has been researched, analyzed, and edited according to best practices. However, the authors make no claim to be exhaustive. No conclusions should be drawn from this report regarding the merits of a request for refugee status or asylum. The fact that some occurrence, person, or organization is not mentioned in the report does not imply that such occurrence never happened or that a person or organization does not exist. This report is the result of independent research and editing. The views and statements expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Finnish Immigration Service and makes no political statement whatsoever.



1. Introduction

The Syrian war that started in 2011 does not show any signs of calming down. Several peace efforts over the years have failed. Adult male citizens of Syria are obliged to serve in the Syrian Arab Army. For years, an increasing number of men have sought to avoid recruitment. Some do this for example by fleeing the country and some might join armed groups supporting the regime instead. Those who evade draft or their family members can face consequences.

During the conflict many new armed groups have been formed. There are groups that support the regime and groups that fight against it. The Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran and Iraq have supported the Syrian regime with fighters and have helped the Syrian army in significant battles. Also Russia's military support especially since 2015 has been substantial.

The armed opposition fighting against the Syrian regime is not a coherent entity nor do the groups always seem to function in a structured manner. There are at least hundreds of different groups with varying ideas about what the future Syria should look like. Some of these groups have also fought each other.

This report seeks to give updated information on military service in the Syrian Arab Army. Issues such as current recruitment methods, possibilities to avoid military service and consequences of draft evasion or desertion are discussed in the report. The report brings up these issues also in relation to the National Defence Forces (NDF) that support the Syrian regime¹. Non-Syrian armed groups, i.e. Hezbollah, Iraqi and Iranian sponsored groups, fighting alongside the Syrian army and the relations between these actors are also discussed. Furthermore, the report evaluates the armed opposition in Syria, for example its recruitment in Syria and Lebanon and possibilities to leave a group.

The terms of reference were drawn up by the Finnish Immigration Service based on issues occurring in asylum processes. Also, while planning the terms of reference previous reports on military service in Syrian army, such as the Danish Immigration Service's and Danish Refugee Council's joint report (2015) and Sweden's Lifos's report (2015) on the military service in Syria, have been taken into consideration.

As there is already information available on the Syrian army in general, emphasis in this report is given to the present situation in the Syrian army and various armed groups.²

The Kurdish party PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) and its armed wing YPG/J (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* and women's *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*) are not included in this report. Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām, Islamic State) is also not included. These organizations have at times very different ways of operating and functioning than other armed groups fighting in the Syrian war. The PYD has practically governed large parts of North and Northwest Syria for several years and declared a federation in areas under its control in March 2016. Isis has tried to establish an "Islamic state" in Syria and Iraq, which includes strict regulation of daily life and the group's fighters.

¹ There are also other groups loyal to the regime, such as the Baath Battalions (*Katā'ib al-Ba' th*) and Palestinian armed groups but the NDF is the largest of these.

² For more information on the military service in Syrian army, armed groups fighting along the regime and against it, see Kozak April 2015; Lifos December 4, 2015; Reuter December 21, 2015.



This report is based on a fact-finding mission to Beirut April 25–29, 2016. There, the Finnish Immigration Service had meetings with six organizations and individuals. One interview (Carnegie) was conducted via Skype on May 13, 2016 as a meeting was not possible to arrange due to time constraints. One interview (Suomi Syyria Yhteisö) was conducted in August 2016 in Helsinki, Finland. All interviews were conducted in English except the interview with Suomi Syyria Yhteisö was in Finnish. Notes were sent to all interlocutors for approval. They were also asked how they wanted to be referenced and informed that the information provided by them would be used in a public report. Some interlocutors did not want to be quoted by name because of the sensitivity of the issue or because they have contacts in Syria. Some of the interlocutors interviewed are Syrians, some visit Syria on a regular basis and some provided information from secondary sources.

In this report, some information is also provided from public sources on certain matters for added value and for the reader to find additional information.

As a result of the fact-finding mission the Finnish Immigration Service will also publish a report on Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and exiting Syria and their ability to travel legally.

The answers from the organizations and individuals interviewed vary to some extent. This might be because the interlocutors' sources have experienced things differently. The situation in Syria can vary significantly from one area to another and it can change rapidly. When it comes to armed opposition groups, they can have their own ways of operating and the situation can depend on the person in charge. For example, an international organization that was interviewed pointed out that in any area of Syria and concerning all armed actors it is hard to establish to what extent conscription is enforced on the ground and how it works.

The answers given by the interlocutors reflect the increasing arbitrariness in the Syrian army. The situation can differ from one person to another and this report does not try to be exhaustive. Information is hard to verify on the ground and objective information from Syria in general is difficult to obtain. The public sources referenced in this report are not an exhaustive list of news and reports on the issue of military service and armed groups in Syria.

As the situation in Syria can change rapidly, it is recommended that the information provided in this report be updated. The research and editing of this report was finished in August 2016.

This report is public but all citations must be referenced.



2. The Syrian Arab Army

The Syrian Arab Army faces severe manpower shortages due to fatalities, defections and desertion. Also, many men refuse to join the armed forces, hence it is difficult for the army to replace the lost soldiers. Before the war it was estimated that the Syrian army had approximately 300 000 soldiers. The army does not publish any numbers on casualties or defectors. Estimates made in 2014 and 2015 of the personnel left vary from 125,000 to 175,000.³

Military service of 18 or 21 months based on one's education is compulsory for all male Syrians and Palestinians living in Syria. The military age is 18–42 years. The age limit for the reserve duty according to the law is 52 years or 54 years if a man has bachelor's degree.⁴

2.1. Recruitment to the Syrian Arab Army

According to Sari Hanafi, professor of sociology at the American University of Beirut (AUB), the normal recruitment procedure is still applied in Syria.⁵ In general, laws are still in force in Syria. According to a Western embassy the regime wants to show that nothing has changed and does not want to let the country slide into total anarchy.⁶ According to Hanafi, a recruitment letter is sent to the local *mukhtar*, the mayor, when a man reaches military age in order to notify him of his military service. Until 2014, young men would know when they would be called up to the army. They would know when they needed to leave the country if they wanted to avoid military service.⁷

Before the crisis one would receive a letter from the recruitment office and a young man would go to the headquarters in his area.⁸ Many men inside Syria do not receive the recruitment letter now because they have fled inside the country. Now, they can contact any recruitment office if they want to join and not just the one in their home town. The regime has become more flexible regarding this.⁹

Also, according to a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center, Khe-der Khaddour, standard recruitment procedure has faced difficulties during the revolution. Already towards the end of 2012 there were areas outside of the regime's control and it could not send recruitment letters those areas. People could also evade draft by moving to areas held by the opposition.

Even though the recruitment procedure has become more flexible, the documents provided have not changed and the databases providing the information for the documents are still the same. The number and name of a man's home town registration office (*Raqm wa Mahal al-Qaid*) is written on the back of the military ID¹⁰.

³ Institute for the Study of War April 2015, p. 12; Lister May 2014, p. 11

⁴ Khaddour, HBS

⁵ Hanafi

⁶ Western embassy

⁷ European diplomat

⁸ Khaddour

⁹ European diplomat

¹⁰ Military book that is given to all men before recruitment to the army. When one enters the service, one hands in his military book and civilian ID and receives a military ID for the duration of the service. When one finishes his military service, military ID, one gives back the military ID and receives his civilian ID and military book. For more information, see Lifos December 4, 2015.



Therefore one's background and origin can still be confirmed from the card, even if it would be issued somewhere else.¹¹

Refugees do not always take their military books, which they receive after finishing military service, with them when fleeing. Either they do not want to share the information regarding the time and place of their service or they do not see a need to carry the document abroad.¹² Also, if a person has defected he would want to get rid of his military ID as it shows that he has defected.¹³

Recruitment to the army has been difficult for a long time and this is a problem for the army.¹⁴ The Syrian army's casualty numbers are high¹⁵ and it needs new fighters¹⁶. Certain professions might be more wanted for the army than others.¹⁷

According to a European diplomat there are less young, fighting-age men in restaurants in Damascus than before. Men working for international organizations are recruited to the army. According to a Western embassy there have been people on the streets and in the universities and schools in Damascus in the same way as there were in the autumn of 2015. The atmosphere in the city has not changed since then.

According to Hanafi, men are recruited to military service on the streets, in the universities and often at check points in the areas controlled by the government. In some areas men can also face violence when they are recruited. According to a Western embassy buses are also being stopped and military aged men are sought in them. The embassy would not be surprised if aggressive recruiting methods are being used.

Because the army needs people, young men can be recruited to military service at check points. According to Khaddour, in 2013–2014 there were more check points that recruited men straight to the army than there are now. It was an exception and was done at the time because of military urgency. According to the information of Heinrich Böll Stiftung (HBS), recruitment is now also carried out in gas stations where check points have been erected. In Latakia, traditionally an area supporting the regime, whole busloads of people can be stopped with the purpose of taking them in for service. The source is not sure if they would eventually be released or all recruited to military service.

Draft evaders are recruited to military service for example in mass arrests, door-to-door campaigns and at universities. Workers in the private sector have also been targeted. In April 2016 in Baniyas, Tartous province companies had to send employees to military service; otherwise they would not have been allowed to operate.¹⁸

In spite of the check points inside Syria, men can still move around to some extent as they are able to avoid permanent check points.¹⁹ Increased recruitment has

¹¹ Khaddour

¹² International organization

¹³ HBS

¹⁴ Western embassy

¹⁵ European diplomat

¹⁶ International organization

¹⁷ Western embassy

¹⁸ International organization

¹⁹ Khaddour



made moving inside and outside Syria more difficult in general. Fear of military service complicates fleeing out of Syria. Before, Syrians who had escaped to Lebanon could more easily go back to Syria for example to get medical treatment. Nowadays getting into Lebanon in general is more difficult for Syrians due to restricted access on the Lebanese border²⁰. Young men can also be recruited to military service at the border. Even taxi drivers can be recruited. As a result, young men try to avoid the border.²¹

Bribery in order to avoid military service is more difficult now, at least if one does not have large amounts of money available.²² In the end of 2014 and 2015 the army set up check points in cooperation with security services and other security actors in Damascus, Homs and in the coastal region. This limits the chances of bribery because the three agencies work as a backup for each other.²³

Conscription does not target every fighting-age male in Syria and there are fighting aged men living freely in Syria.²⁴ According to a Western embassy the regime does not want everyone to flee the country. Also, it needs fighters who are motivated, so forcing everyone to fight is not in its interests.

According to a European diplomat, the Syrian government facilitated the mass migration of Syrians in 2015. People were allowed to get out of Syria through official border crossings. Before, men of drafting age only had to pretend to be visiting another country in order to get out. According to the diplomat, the regime is trying to cleanse the country. President Assad said in a speech in July 2015 that the country is for those who protect it²⁵. Therefore, there is a risk that the ones who have left the country can't return when the war ultimately ends.

According to a Western embassy, the fact that many Syrians left the country in 2015 took away some of the burden from the state. Damascus, for example, has become overcrowded and expensive as people have fled there from other areas in Syria.

According to a European diplomat, after the mass migration of Syrians in 2015 the military age was increased and, more men were recruited at check points. Men who had finished their military training were also recruited, therefore a lot of the recruits had some military training.

A large number of soldiers in the Syrian army are probably not pro-regime, but their personal opinions do not matter. The fact that they are in the army also affects the lives of their families as it is hard for them to support the opposition if one's son, brother or father is fighting in the army.²⁶

²⁰ Lebanon restricted the entry of Syrians to Lebanon in early 2015 by introducing certain requirements, such as valid identity documents and entry categories of which being a refugee is not one. See for example: Janmyr March 2016 and Amnesty International June 2015.

²¹ KAS

²² HBS

²³ Khaddour

²⁴ European diplomat; Western embassy

²⁵ See for example BBC July 26, 2015 and Global Voices August 22, 2015.

²⁶ European diplomat



2.1.1. Military age

Several sources interviewed indicated that men are conscripted at the age of 18 and not at an earlier age.²⁷ If a minor is recruited, he is most probably released when his age is checked.²⁸ It is hard for men aged sixteen to seventeen to get a passport. The authorities want to ensure that they can't escape and these young men might receive a passport that is valid for only two years.²⁹

According to an international organization, minors can join the army voluntarily. They then serve in their home areas. An interviewed European diplomat is not sure if minors can join the Syrian army voluntarily.

The maximum age for military service has been increased from 42 years. The sources did not indicate to what age it has been increased or if there is a certain age which is applied as the maximum age.³⁰ It is possible that men over 42 years are recruited to the army, but no official rule exists and therefore no official maximum age. HBS was not sure if the age limit for drafting has been increased.

2.1.2. Recruitment of minorities to the Syrian army

Recruitment to the army has concentrated on minorities in Syria.³¹

The Druze have protested against drafting in Druze dominated areas, for example in Suweida. They want to stay in their traditional areas and not serve in places further away.³² HBS is not sure how widely men are drafted to army in Suweida.

The Syrian army and the PYD³³ have had an agreement in place since 2011 whereby the YPG/J³⁴ is allowed to function even if government forces are close by.³⁵ The regime claims it has given equipment to the PYD since 2012.³⁶ In spite of this, there are tensions between the Syrian army and the Kurds. There is also a division among the Kurds and their support to the different groups fighting in the war.³⁷

According to HBS the army is not trying to recruit in Qamishli. The army could not move outside its areas in Qamishli. A European diplomat also shares the view that the army does not recruit in Qamishli. According to Hanafi men are recruited to military service also in Qamishli, but not in areas where there are only Kurds.

In the spring of 2016, there have been cases where both the army and the YPG have forcefully conscripted people. The source is not sure who the army recruits – if it recruits Arabs as well as Kurds.³⁸

²⁷ European diplomat; Hanafi; International organization; Khaddour

²⁸ HBS; Khaddour

²⁹ HBS

³⁰ Hanafi; European diplomat

³¹ HBS

³² European diplomat; HBS

³³ Main Kurdish party in the Kurdish controlled areas.

³⁴ YPG is the military wing of PYD. YPJ is the women's equivalent to the YPG.

³⁵ European diplomat; HBS; International organization

³⁶ European diplomat

³⁷ International organization

³⁸ International organization



There have been demonstrations against military service in Qamishli as well and also clashes between the YPG and the NDF. It is possible that the clashes were related to local issues and not necessarily to the military service.³⁹

2.1.3. Exemptions

Family's only son, *wahid*, is not at risk of being recruited to serve in the army.⁴⁰ The exemption becomes permanent when the man's mother turns 50 and undergoes a medical examination to confirm that she can't have more children.⁴¹

A man can postpone his military service if he is the bread winner of the family and he has younger brothers. The source estimates that this is possible until the younger brother or brothers turn sixteen. It is possible, however, that at this stage of the war this rule can be applied arbitrarily according to the area or officer in charge.⁴²

Students are exempted from military service as long as they are studying.⁴³ According to a European diplomat, there has, however, been a change in the recruitment schedule. Students used to be recruited to the army after the academic year had ended; now their names can be added to the drafting list right after the last exams in March.⁴⁴

Before the war there was a so called administrative postponement of nine months after one's graduation. Bribing the police or the recruitment office was also possible and one could avoid conscription after graduating for years.⁴⁵

Khaddour has heard of students in Damascus, Latakia and Homs, who deliberately try to fail their exams in order to postpone their graduation. This tactic works, despite the fact that the regime is aware of it, because there are so many who do it. The regime needs students and universities to keep on existing in the society in order to uphold the look of normality in Syria.

People who have paid, legally, to avoid military service are not recruited.⁴⁶ One has to pay 4,000–8,000 USD in order to get an exemption.⁴⁷ According to a European diplomat, Syrians living abroad can still pay to get an exemption from military service.

Normally men who have dual citizenship and have served in army in the other country are exempted from military service. The source is not sure if this is still the case.⁴⁸

³⁹ HBS

⁴⁰ European diplomat; HBS; International organization

⁴¹ International organization

⁴² International organization

⁴³ European diplomat; Khaddour

⁴⁴ European diplomat

⁴⁵ HBS

⁴⁶ European diplomat

⁴⁷ International organization

⁴⁸ International organization



Men have to carry the permit for an exemption with them all the time; otherwise one faces consequences at check points. They need to carry the military book with them as well, as the reason for the exemption is written in the book.⁴⁹

Though exemptions are still technically in place, there might be arbitrariness in the way they are implemented. For example, even if one has a certificate of studies and an exemption because of that, the certificate can simply be torn up at check points.⁵⁰

2.2. Training and deployment of conscripts

A man will not know his placement in advance. According to Hanafi, the Syrian army functions still as a centralized system.

According to Hanafi, if men are recruited from the street to military service they are taken to military posts. Draft evaders will be charged and imprisoned to wait for the next training course. Courses are held regularly. If a man has education his course can last longer and he may be sent to serve in special duties. Others will have minimum of 45 days of training.

Based on the knowledge of Khaddour, recruited men are put into training. If one has undergone military service before, the training can last a few weeks and then one is sent to fight. If one has not undergone military service, one will have the normal training of 45 days and six months. The source has not heard that men would be sent directly to the front and he believes that most of the recruits do not end up at the front. The army still has rules on how to function; it has not become a militia.

Professional fighters are the ones who are really trusted and given trusted positions. However, if there is a surprising military situation, anyone can be sent to fight. Usually, when operations are planned, professional soldiers are sent to the fronts.⁵¹

According to a European diplomat some men who are redrafted are sent to hotspots. In this way the regime tries to raise a man's motivation to fight if the person is not trusted: in hotspots or frontlines one kills or gets killed. Based on the knowledge of an international organization recruits can also be sent to the front.

According to HBS, recruits can be sent to the frontlines or check points early on, without much training. This view is shared by an international organization which says that the training period is two to four weeks.

The Konrad-Adenauer Foundation (KAS) is not sure what happens to the men recruited to the army, but it is likely that they get some training before going away to fight.

The duties of recruited soldiers depend on the area. According to Hanafi, for example, in Aleppo the duties are more dangerous than in Suweida. In the Syrian army

⁴⁹ International organization

⁵⁰ HBS

⁵¹ Khaddour



there is a tradition of bribery. One is often able to pay for a better place of service or easier tasks.⁵²

Sensitive duties are given to Alawites and not to other conscripts. Alawites enter the army more frequently than others, so it might raise their proportion in more important positions. It does not mean, however, that a conscript could not get an important position, such as a tank leader or an air defender.⁵³

2.3. Benefits and leaves

Professional soldiers used to be paid a salary of 18 000 Syrian pounds (SYP) before the war. It was equivalent to 300–400 US dollars (USD). The officers and generals were paid more, up to 30,000 SYP. Men undergoing obligatory military service were and are not paid; they only receive residency and food.⁵⁴ Now, professional soldiers only get 15,000–20,000 SYP/month which is around 50 USD/month.⁵⁵

According to Hanafi, soldiers can have leaves but it depends on the area. If there is heavy fighting going on one does not necessarily get a leave. If one gets a leave one also receives a permit for it.

According to HBS only trusted individuals would get leaves now. During a leave men have their military ID and a permit for the leave. According to an international organization leaves are now very rare, though not impossible.

According to Khaddour the possibility to have a leave depends on the location of one's home. If one can't access it, leaves are usually not granted. One can get a leave if one's home is close by. Corruption also facilitates getting a leave, one can pay money or provide commodities. The possibility to get a leave depends on the person, his background and his social status. If one gets a leave, it is six to eight days every two months.

2.4. Recruitment of reservists

According to an international organization reservists are being called to the army nowadays.

According to Hanafi reservists can be called up to do reserve duty up to the age of 45 years. According to an international organization the reserve age has been increased. It depends on the case and area and can vary between 50 and 60 years.

Reservists are informed with letters that the police brings to one's home or recruited at check points. Reserve duty can be applied to anyone within the age limit.⁵⁶ Also based on the knowledge of HBS, reservists can be recruited to the service at check points. If one is recruited or not depends on the duties during the military service in the past. The source has anecdotal information that the demand for tank leaders might be high.

⁵² European diplomat; HBS

⁵³ HBS

⁵⁴ HBS

⁵⁵ HBS; Khaddour

⁵⁶ Hanafi; Khaddour



According to an international organization men might be able to bribe recruitment officials to get their names off of the reserve duty list.

2.5. Dischargement from the army

Several sources share the view that dischargements from the military service have been very rare.⁵⁷ There are men who were in the army when the uprising started in 2011 and who are still there. The service time has become longer, even indefinite. Some have been discharged in the beginning of the conflict.⁵⁸ There have been three rounds of dischargements since the start of the conflict. In 2011, one's military service could be lengthened by a few months and one could be discharged after that. Now deserting is the only way out.⁵⁹

Also according to Hanafi, dischargement from the service is rare. He has only heard of dischargements in the case of injury. A European diplomat does not think that one could buy dischargement from the army as it would pose a risk to the officers as well. According to Khaddour, soldiers are now treated almost like professional soldiers and receive the same benefits, for example salaries, as non-commissioned officers, and dischargement is uncertain.

2.6. Evasion and desertion

There have been campaigns by the regime to encourage deserters and draft evaders to sign up for service in exchange for amnesty.⁶⁰ It is not certain how many, if any, men have signed up or if they have faced any consequences.

If one deserts from the army he would receive the death penalty.⁶¹ HBS knows of one case where a defector was allowed to return to the army.

A European diplomat is not sure how widely death penalty is implemented. At least the person would go to jail. The source mentioned as anecdotal information that there have been summary executions of some deserters in order to set an example.

According to an international organization a deserter can be recruited at a check point. He can be put to service, also frontline, or in prison for up to 260 days. The source points out that there is no official information on this. The consequences depend for example on the needs on the frontline and the position and rank of the deserter. It is likely that a deserter would be tortured in a prison.

According to Khaddour a draft evader's or deserter's name is normally put on a list for one year. If the authorities do not hear from him, they assume that he is dead. This might not be the case if one was on the frontline.

⁵⁷ International organization

⁵⁸ European diplomat; HBS

⁵⁹ HBS

⁶⁰ International organization

⁶¹ European diplomat; Hanafi; HBS



Defected soldiers try to get a fake ID or one of their siblings' IDs in order to be able to present themselves as a "clean" person and not as wanted by the regime. Defected soldiers want to get rid of their military IDs.⁶²

Especially defected officers are afraid of consequences. Some of them have sought protection in the Apaydin camp in Hatay, Turkey. Soldiers who fled the army do not talk about it in Lebanon either. They are afraid that Hezbollah will send them back to Syria. HBS has heard of one such case where a wanted person was taken in Bekaa valley and deported to Syria.⁶³

According to Hanafi, if one works as a civilian in the army and leaves, the consequences would be the same. One would be regarded as a traitor because one has information about the army. According to HBS civilian workers and people working for the state need to report to the Syrian intelligence. They need a permit, which is hard to obtain, in order to exit the country. According to an international organization, government employees in general are not allowed to exit Syria.

2.7. Possible consequences of evasion or desertion for family members

There would be some consequences for the deserter's family, though a European diplomat is not certain what the consequences would be. The regime might pressure the family more if it believes that the deserter can be found.

According to Hanafi, the brothers can be arrested until the draft evader or deserter returns. Female family members can also be arrested. If one works as a civilian in the army but decides to leave, the consequences would be the same for the family.

According to HBS, family members will face consequences if one of them defects from the army. The father is often detained, but it can also be the mother. They may be imprisoned for a few months. The family would be at least pressured for some time. Family members can be in danger also in neighboring countries.

Family members can, in addition to getting arrested and having their homes pillaged, be excluded from the community. The consequences depend on the area. The father or brothers of a deserter may be recruited to the army to replace the deserter.⁶⁴

If the draft evader or deserter has family, the army can ask them about the whereabouts of the deserter. If the family members do not know the person's whereabouts, they do not face consequences. If one deserts from the army with guns, the family members are arrested if they are still in Syria. If they are not in the country, they are put on the wanted persons' list. The father or brother would not be recruited to the army, because they would not be trusted. Instead, they would be imprisoned.⁶⁵

⁶² HBS

⁶³ HBS

⁶⁴ International organization

⁶⁵ Khaddour



3. National Defence Forces (NDF)

Groups belonging to the National Defence Forces (NDF, *Quwat al-Difa al-Watani*) are pro-regime militias or paramilitary groups. NDF is an umbrella organization for various groups and was first organized in 2013. They have been formed from criminal gangs, *shabiha*, and popular committees that function locally to serve the regime and the army. The exact number of all of the fighters in NDF is not known, but estimates vary between 60,000 and 100,000.⁶⁶

According to a European diplomat, the NDF has become more than just street patrols. NDF soldiers are considered to be more loyal to the regime than the conscript soldiers in the army.⁶⁷ Still, an international organization considers NDF a gang that works in an arbitrary manner. Their work varies depending on areas; in some areas the groups might be more disciplined and in some act like armed and violent gangs. According to Khaddour the groups belonging to the NDF can vary a lot between each other.

There are groups belonging to NDF that are formed based on religious affiliation. For example Alawites have their own groups and also Christians to a lesser extent.⁶⁸

3.1. Recruitment to the National Defence Forces

By joining the NDF one can avoid military service. In the NDF, one can influence the place of service to a higher degree and choose to be close to one's family.⁶⁹ This was changed at some point. Before, there was no guarantee of the place of service. The change made serving in the pro-regime militias or paramilitary groups more enticing for example for people from Suweida and Salamiya who had resisted joining the army because they would be sent away from their hometown.⁷⁰

Hanafi is not sure if people can choose freely between the army and the NDF. According to Khaddour, serving in the NDF does not remove the responsibility to serve in the army.

There have been posters in the Latakia province put up by a group called the Coastal Shield Brigade (*Liwa Dir' al-Sahel*) that is part of the NDF. In the posters the group promises to help, for example, a deserter so that he would not be punished or recruited to the army if he joins the Brigade.⁷¹

The motives to join the NDF vary a lot. One might join, for example, because of need for money or young men might join because they want to carry a gun. People can also be recruited randomly, but this is not a very efficient way of getting motivated soldiers.⁷² People can join the NDF if they need money in order to get married. One can also settle old grudges with the guns one receives by joining the NDF.⁷³

⁶⁶ See for example: Kozak April 2015, pp. 15–16; The Carter Center November 5, 2013, pp. 8-9

⁶⁷ HBS

⁶⁸ European diplomat

⁶⁹ European diplomat; International organization

⁷⁰ International organization

⁷¹ International organization

⁷² HBS

⁷³ International organization



Recruitment is done in some cases on sectarian basis.⁷⁴ According to HBS the groups are tribal constellations within the NDF and recruitment depends on the community. Tribal recruitment is important especially in the countryside. In cities, the NDF seeks out the largest families and recruits through them.⁷⁵

According to Khaddour recruitment to the NDF is flexible and voluntary and it is based on family, sect or regional and local networks. One can, unlike in the army, sign a contract to serve in the NDF for a certain period of time, for example of six months, one year or two years.

Young people join the NDF because of locality; they do not necessarily want to protect their area but they join in order to stay close to home. Because NDFs are a network of one's own group, one joins them because he knows the people in the group already. People trust these groups more than the army.⁷⁶

There is societal pressure for many to serve in the NDF.⁷⁷ According to an international organization it can vary by groups, but in general joining is voluntary.

According to HBS, groups in the NDF would need something to pressure a person to join forcefully. If there is no reason to pressure a person, there is no forced recruitment to NDF even if a tribe would be recruiting. Alawites might face more pressure to join, but the source was not certain about this.

According to a European diplomat, there are more and more older or previously wounded men serving at neighborhood check points. There are also several women serving in the NDF who serve especially in neighborhood guards.

Khaddour has heard of cases where the NDF or different militias have recruited men of sixteen to seventeen years, because there is no law for the NDF.

Recruits to the NDF receive an ID. If armed groups fighting against the government would find a person with an NDF ID, he or she would be killed. They are more hated than soldiers in the Syrian army because the ones in the army might have been recruited forcefully and not be able to defect.⁷⁸

Also according to Khaddour, those who join the NDF receive an official document for it and an ID card as proof that they are with the NDF. They can show the document to the army recruitment office and with the ID they can cross any check point more easily.

3.2. Training and benefits

According to Hanafi, those who serve in the NDF are paid more than those in the Syrian army. Based on the knowledge of HBS, the NDF pays 15,000–20,000 SYP/month, an international organization says the salary is 16,000 SYP/month. According to Khaddour, the salary is at least 30,000 SYP/month.

⁷⁴ Hanafi

⁷⁵ HBS

⁷⁶ Khaddour

⁷⁷ European diplomat

⁷⁸ HBS



The salary is not necessarily always a (primary) source of motivation to join the NDF. Members can also take spoils of war or kidnap people for ransom. The plummeting of the Syrian pound has increased the number of kidnappings at least in Damascus and it creates an uncomfortable feeling in the city.⁷⁹

Training for the NDF is very short, possibly only ten to fifteen days.⁸⁰

A European diplomat is not sure whether the members of NDF have leaves. According to Khaddour, leaves are possible and the groups can organize them themselves.

3.3. Leaving the National Defence Forces

Members can probably leave the NDF, though this might vary depending on the area or group. For example in Qamishli, where the NDF has recruited Arabs, they could leave but they rather remain in the NDF and protect their tribes, especially those who were involved in the 2004 massacre⁸¹ of the Kurds.⁸²

Also according to Khaddour, one can leave the NDF freely. The contract made between the group and an individual states when the serving period ends. One can also leave if something sudden happens.

4. Armed Groups Supporting the Syrian Regime

4.1. The chain of command and the relations between the armed groups and the Syrian Arab Army

Before Russia started its airstrikes in Syria in September 2015, Iran was the leading external power in Syria. Then there was militiafication of the army. For example, unit marks were added, there used to be only a few of them before. Iran emphasized the NDF, of which Iranian backed groups are officially part. Since the start of the Russian airstrikes the Syrian army was emphasized over the NDF. The two countries, Syria and Russia, have long had strong military relations. Iranian influence grew again when Russia started its official partial withdrawal from Syria in March 2016.⁸³

Also according to an international organization, Russia wants to emphasize the Syrian army in the war over the several groups fighting along it more than the several groups belonging to NDF. Different militias complicate the chain of command and military operations.

According to Hanafi, the Syrian army can command Hezbollah and other armed groups fighting alongside it. However, Hezbollah can treat some areas, such as Zabadani, as its own. The Syrian regime is very weak and it needs the external support it gets; the Assad regime does not have supremacy over the external groups. It

⁷⁹ International organization

⁸⁰ International organization

⁸¹ See for example: International Crisis Group January 22, 2013.

⁸² HBS

⁸³ European diplomat



is hard to say who has the last word.⁸⁴ Also according to a Western embassy the Syrian army depends on Hezbollah and the groups backed by Iran and Iraq. According to HBS the Syrian army probably does not have power over Hezbollah or the other groups, but decisions on military operations are still made together⁸⁵.

This view is also shared by Khaddour: the regime and the groups have a partnership. The regime needs the groups for technical and military assistance, whereas the groups need the regime in order to have a contact point on the ground, to open roads and so forth.

Hezbollah's fighters are considered to be better fighters than the soldiers in the Syrian army. According to a European diplomat, the fighters are in an existential battle against Salafis in Syria.⁸⁶ Hezbollah is also more trusted than the soldiers in the Syrian army. Officers in the Syrian army are more corrupt than the ones in foreign groups, for example bribery is easier at army check points, though not in the border areas or Lebanon.⁸⁷ Also, another source states that the different groups' fighters are motivated to fight until the end.⁸⁸

Armed groups in Syria who have been monitoring the radio communication in the Quseir area are aware of the dissatisfaction between the armed groups allied with the regime and the Syrian army. Hezbollah's structure is very hierarchical; they are fighting for certain goals in Syria. Some Syrian groups for example loot and kill out of revenge, something which is not accepted in the strategic fighting of Hezbollah.⁸⁹

According to an international organization, all local Shia groups do not like the Iranian presence in Syria as there are ideological differences between them.

4.2. Recruitment to Armed Groups Supporting the Syrian Regime⁹⁰

Hezbollah and Iraqi groups are the largest foreign groups fighting the regime. The source refers to Human Rights Watch, according to which there are around 10,000 Afghans fighting in Syria. Iranian media puts this number at 20,000.⁹¹

Most of the fighters in these the groups are Afghans, Iraqis and Lebanese. There are also some Iranians and only a few Pakistanis and Yemenis.⁹² There are also Russian soldiers in Syria⁹³. The presence of fighters of other nationalities, such as Tadjik or Uzbek, is also possible.⁹⁴

⁸⁴ Hanafi

⁸⁵ Hezbollah's leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah declared in a speech in June 2016 that its money and weapons come from Iran. The two parties are known to be allies but this is the first time that it was declared officially. See Daily Star June 25, 2016.

⁸⁶ European diplomat

⁸⁷ HBS

⁸⁸ Khaddour

⁸⁹ HBS

⁹⁰ More on Shiite groups fighting in Syria, see Smyth 2015.

⁹¹ HBS

⁹² Hanafi; HBS; Khaddour

⁹³ Exact numbers of Russian soldiers, their placements or duties in Syria are not known. There have been several news reports of Russian soldiers and advisors in Syria. See for example: The Telegraph May 12, 2016 and BBC May 6, 2016.

⁹⁴ HBS



According to a European diplomat, Iran brings mostly Afghan fighters to Syria. According to Iran they are in Syria voluntarily to defend the Shia shrine, Sayyida Zeinab, in Damascus.⁹⁵ But other sources suggest that this is not always the case. They can be taken from Iranian prisons, or they might be drug traffickers who are caught or Afghans in Iran without a residence permit and thus vulnerable.⁹⁶ They might be offered Iranian nationality. Afghans are, however, in general not appreciated in Iran so they might prefer to stay in Syria after fighting.⁹⁷

The Afghans have an own unit under Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Fatemiyoun Division (*Liwa al-Fatemiyoun*), and they are deployed in active fighting. They might be regarded as more dispensable and more prone to take risks. In return they are promised residence permits in Iran or even nationality.⁹⁸

Hezbollah recruits fighters in Lebanon regardless of their religion, however only Shias will get high positions. Hanafi was not sure of the methods for recruitment, but most likely it is done through contacts, in local communities and by screening suitable candidates. According to Hanafi one can refuse recruitment.⁹⁹ According to Khaddour Hezbollah also seeks to recruit fighters in Syria as not that many Lebanese are sent to fight in Syria. Hezbollah, as other groups, has offices in Damascus and Latakia and it recruits for example Alawites and Sunnis, although not conservative ones.

There have been rumors of increased recruitment in Lebanon by Hezbollah. It recruits through the community, in schools or businesses. It only accepts members it can trust. If people do not want to join, Hezbollah can't, at least not easily, force them because they would have their own community behind them.¹⁰⁰

Armed groups fighting the Syrian regime are in general open to all new members regardless of their religion. For example Damascus and Latakia are good areas for recruitment as there is no work available and the general environment is militarized.¹⁰¹

4.3. Training and benefits

The fighters are trained outside Syria (for example in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon) in already existing camps, but can be trained in Syria as well.¹⁰²

In general, these groups pay more salary to the fighters than the Syrian army does. Hezbollah offers insurance to its fighters and education for their children. It pays a salary of 400 USD/month.¹⁰³ Also according to an International organization Hezbol-

⁹⁵ European diplomat

⁹⁶ HBS. Swedish Migration Agency published in a report on Afghan fighters sent by Iran to Syria June 2016, see Lifos June 2016. See also HRW January 29, 2016 and The Guardian November 5, 2015. There have also been rumors of Iran recruiting fighters inside Afghanistan as well, The Guardian June 30, 2016.

⁹⁷ International organization

⁹⁸ European diplomat

⁹⁹ Hanafi

¹⁰⁰ HBS

¹⁰¹ Khaddour

¹⁰² Hanafi; Khaddour

¹⁰³ HBS



lah pays its fighters 400–500 USD/month, which is more than some other groups. Hezbollah also gives assistance to the fighters' families.

4.4. Duties, tasks and places of deployment

It depends on the case how the Syrian army and the armed groups supporting it cooperate in fighting. The Syrian army is not good in heavy combat and there is more and more division of labor. Different militias often do the fighting and the army maintains the order in the area afterwards.¹⁰⁴

Hezbollah's forces are deployed to areas of particular interest to Hezbollah, for example the Syrian-Lebanese border and the coast line of Syria. Hezbollah dominated the battle in Qalamoun and the Shiite towns of Fua and Kefrayya in the Idlib province are also of importance to it. Hezbollah's fighters were also present in the operations room in Aleppo and in the fighting there.¹⁰⁵

According to Khaddour, Hezbollah is an important actor in Qalamoun, Iran in Aleppo and the regime in Homs and Damascus. The groups and the Syrian regime decide together where fighters are needed and what areas can't be lost.

5. Armed Opposition¹⁰⁶

As there are at least hundreds of armed groups fighting against the Syrian regime, this chapter does not intend to give a full picture of the situation but more a general overview of the functioning of the armed groups in Syria. Khaddour points out that these groups function in a totally different manner than the Syrian army or the groups mentioned above.

5.1. Recruitment to armed opposition

Several sources indicate that the armed opposition in Syria recruits fighters voluntarily.¹⁰⁷ Recruitment can vary between different groups.¹⁰⁸ A European diplomat does not know if the armed opposition recruits forcefully. According to the source there is peer pressure to join.

Some fighters join because they feel the war in Syria is an existential threat to them. Either one fights the regime or faces the consequences of resisting it. One can also get revenge for past wrongdoings by joining the fight.¹⁰⁹

The fighters in the armed opposition have, as opposed to the soldiers in the Syrian army, an ideology and a local identity that they share. Localization of the conflict, as with groups belonging to the NDF, can attract young people to join. For example, the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *Al-Geish al-Suri al-Hur*) works much like the NDF in

¹⁰⁴ Hanafi

¹⁰⁵ European diplomat; HBS; International organization

¹⁰⁶ In this chapter armed groups, except for YPG/J and Isis, fighting against the Syrian regime in general are discussed.

¹⁰⁷ Hanafi; HBS; International organization; Khaddour

¹⁰⁸ HBS

¹⁰⁹ European diplomat



this regard; groups under FSA are only local. On the other hand localization increases fragmentation. Khaddour has heard of cases where men have joined a group when local fighting has erupted. This is not, however, a good way to recruit as the group is not institutionalized then.¹¹⁰

According to Adham, it is not easy to join Jabhat Fath al-Sham (previously Jabhat al-Nusra¹¹¹) because the group has high standards for new recruits. One can apply for membership. Before being able to join, one has to go through a three month training, during which the person will be tested.¹¹²

In order to join FSA it is enough that one is Syrian and has not committed crimes. FSA and the leaders have gained experience during the years and they can now better distinguish spies that seek to enter the armed groups. According to Adham, there are many people who try to work as spies in the armed groups for the Syrian regime. According to a European diplomat, it is likely that there are spies working for the regime among the armed opposition. If there is strong evidence against the person and if the person confesses being a spy, there will be a trial and the person will be shot.¹¹³

5.1.1. Recruitment in Lebanon

There is anecdotal evidence of some recruitment in Lebanon. Refugee communities and those people opposing the Syrian regime are the targets of recruitment.¹¹⁴

According to Hanafi, Jabhat Fath al-Sham does some recruiting in Lebanon. They recruit anyone who shares their ideology regardless of nationality. Recruited people do not operate in Lebanon but leave for Syria, though some may stay in Lebanon to provide logistics. International organization does not know if the armed opposition recruits in Lebanon, though Jabhat Fath al-Sham functions in Lebanon, close to the Syrian border. There would be fertile ground for recruiting as the area is poor and conservative.

According to Khaddour, the Syrian armed opposition is present in the Syrian refugee camps but not very active in Lebanon. According to him the groups do not recruit in Lebanon.

There have been Syrian fighters, for example from FSA, in Aarsal but there is no active recruitment.¹¹⁵ Also Jabhat Fath al-Sham and Isis are present around Aarsal. The Lebanese army and Hezbollah have been able to prevent their expansion in Lebanon.¹¹⁶

The armed groups are not powerful in Lebanon; they can only be present in Palestinian refugee camps where Lebanese authorities do not operate in general and in North Lebanon.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Khaddour

¹¹¹ Jabhat al-Nusra announced in July 2016 its split from al-Qaida and its new name Jabhat Fath al-Sham.

¹¹² Adham

¹¹³ Adham

¹¹⁴ European diplomat

¹¹⁵ HBS

¹¹⁶ KAS

¹¹⁷ HBS



If a person trying to join the armed opposition is caught by Lebanese officials, he will be imprisoned for a long time. Crossing the border to Syria is not easy; it has gotten more difficult for the people who live in the area as well.¹¹⁸

5.2. Training and benefits

The interlocutors gave varying answers to the question if fighters receive a salary or not. Fighters receive probably some kind of remuneration but it is not the only motive to join.¹¹⁹

According to Hanafi most of the armed groups do not pay salary to the fighters, they might send some money for the family. One exception is Fath al-Islam, which pays salary for the members in Ghouta who have family. The group also provides living for the fighter during service.

Also according to HBS the groups pay very little to the fighters, for example only 1 USD/day. Jabhat Fath al-Sham might pay its fighters more.¹²⁰ According to Khaddour at least some groups pay a steady income to their fighters and also provide them with military uniforms. One might get paid 100 USD/month and food and other commodities for the fighter's family.

According to Adham, FSA pays the fighters 100 USD/month. They also receive food bags twice a month if there are some available. Also Jabhat Fath al-Sham pays 100 USD/month. Some fighters among the FSA leave the groups because they are tired of fighting for low remuneration. The fighters' families also live on charity.¹²¹

There is not much research on the training of the fighters in the armed opposition. Jabhat Fath al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham have been successful in fighting but it is not known how much training there is behind it.¹²² According to Adham, Jabhat Fath al-Sham has training camps where fighters are given physical and religious training.

Jabhat Fath al-Sham has a good reputation among the fighters. From the beginning, it has recruited young men and trained them. Some of the fighters also have fighting experience from Afghanistan and Iraq. FSA, on the other hand, has also older men in its ranks and fighters that do also other things than fight. According to Adham, 60 % of FSA's fighters are at check points or serve as guards. This decreases its capabilities to fight efficiently.¹²³

5.3. Deserting from the Syrian Arab Army to the armed opposition

In the first two years of the Syrian war the FSA was established by defectors. Since then, according to HBS, the FSA has been suspicious about defectors because the war has been going on for so long. An international organization believes that if a

¹¹⁸ HBS

¹¹⁹ European diplomat

¹²⁰ HBS

¹²¹ Adham

¹²² International organization

¹²³ Adham



person has served in the Syrian army for a long time and in a high-level position, it is not guaranteed that an armed group would trust him.

According to Adham, FSA still seeks to attract men serving in the Syrian army to defect to their side. If a person deserts from the army, he could go and live in the areas under the control of FSA or Jabhat Fath al-Sham. Before joining FSA, he would be interviewed and several questions would be asked. FSA promotes defecting on front lines, where opposing sides are close to each other and they can talk with each other. In general, defecting is seen as a victory for the FSA and that a person is saved. Adham believes that FSA succeeds often in convincing the soldiers - if they are Syrian. According to Adham more and more soldiers on the front lines fighting alongside the Syrian regime are foreigners.¹²⁴

5.4. Leaving a group, joining other armed opposition groups

According to a European diplomat, leaving any group is hard, whereas according to HBS it is possible to leave a group. According to Khaddour, it is possible to leave the FSA, but not to leave the radical groups and to stay in Syria. In Turkey there are lot of people who have escaped from Jabhat Fath al-Sham or Isis.

One can rejoin a group again if one has left it earlier. This can be a problem for the group when it comes to fighting as the number of active soldiers is not necessarily known all the time. The groups might have got more structured with regard to this as the war has evolved.¹²⁵

According to an international organization, leaving a group and joining another is voluntary. A fighter could for example switch from the FSA to Isis. Some groups are more stable with regard their members, such as Jabhat Fath al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, but changing a group is usually easy.

According to Adham, it is easy to change the group within the FSA. It is also possible to move from Jabhat Fath al-Sham to the FSA, but it does not happen very often.

Also, Khaddour believes that a person can change his group within certain limits. For example, changing from the FSA to Jabhat Fath al-Sham is easy, but the other way around is not. In general, it is easier to join more radical groups, as so called moderate groups would not trust the fighters.

¹²⁴ Adham

¹²⁵ HBS. For more information on reasons leaving armed opposition groups and changing between, see for example Mironova et al. May 12, 2014. Some interviewed ex-fighters indicated that the lack of discipline and organization in the groups motivated their decision to leave.



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