

بسمه و زيتونه

BASMEH & ZEITONEH
RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT

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A Sword of Damocles

Compulsory Military Service in Syria and
its Consequences on the Lives of Syrians



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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

B&Z	Basmeh & Zeitooneh
GoS	Government of Syria
NDF	National Defense Forces
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SAF	Syrian Armed Forces
UNHCR	United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees

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DISCLAIMER

Basmeh & Zeitooneh made all possible efforts to represent only accurate data, crosscheck all the information in this report, and translate all Arabic data obtained during the research phase into English as carefully as possible. This does not rule out the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which the team hereby expresses its regrets.

Executive Summary

Military conscription is structurally indicated as a main deterrent for the safe return of Syrian military-age men and their relatives. Nonetheless, there are few in-depth reports about and first-hand accounts of those who served their conscription or those who avoided their conscription, to provide an insight into the lived realities of life within, and in the shadow of, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

This report aims to give a voice to those adversely affected by military conscription: to men who have experienced life in the SAA and left with significant scars and traumas, as well as military-age men who chose not to serve and live in fear of that decision every day of their lives. These men who choose not to serve often have no prospect of going back to Syria, and are stuck within the country they sought refuge in as a result of the war and their decision to avoid conscription.

A large part of the reason why the issue of military conscription is important is that the SAA has grown past its role as a national army towards a tool to oppress the very population it is supposed to protect. Together with growing inequalities and harsh realities that the SAA is an incubator for, this has led to military conscription becoming an instrument feared by many Syrians today, and an increasing number of desertions and defections.

This study aimed to assess these changing conditions within the SAA, and the consequences that they have on the lives of military-age men and their relatives. The report relied on the real-life testimonies of men who chose to serve, some of whom ended up defecting or deserting, as well as those who chose not to serve at all. Along with the valuable insight gained from these respondents, key informants and experts in the field were also interviewed within the context of this study.

The report found that serving within the SAA takes a grave physical, material and psychological toll on those who serve, as well as those who do not. Moreover, due to the criminalization of draft avoidance, desertion and defection, many of the men who fall under these categories seek refuge outside of Syria for fear of detention and other punishment. As such, returning to Syria for these men is not an option. Presently, the Government of Syria has put in place a system of amnesties and reconciliation agreements, encompassing those who did not serve, that it does not respect, and so these men are at a high risk of harm if they were to cross the border back to their home country.

In light of these main findings, it is essential that:

- Syrian military-age males receive protection outside of Syria as long as there are no genuine guarantees on the part of the GoS for the implementation of a comprehensive amnesty for draft avoiders and deserters, and other essential guarantees for the physical, legal and material safety of returnees. Therefore, the right to asylum for Syrian refugees, and respect for the principle of non-refoulement, should be upheld.
- An understanding of how the adverse effects of military conscription impact, also on the long term, the lives, psychosocial well-being and livelihood opportunities of Syrian men and their relatives, is incorporated into humanitarian and protection programming.

Mandatory military conscription¹ Syria was made effective six years after Syria's independence from France in 1947. Since then, military conscription has taken many forms. During the civil war, conscription has become a means to draft men² between the ages of 18-42 into the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in order to fight on the side of the Government of Syria (GoS) against opposition groups.

Previous exploratory research by Basmeh & Zeitooneh, and investigations by other civil society groups and think tanks, demonstrate the impact that military conscription has on the lives of Syrian men and women – ranging from a fear of the Syrian security apparatus, to one of the main reasons men and often times entire families flee Syria.³ However, despite the prominent role of mandatory conscription, there are few publicly available reports based on detailed testimonies of people who served, or refused to serve, and the impact this has had, and continues to have, on their lives.

This report aims to show the reality of military conscription after the outbreak of protests in Syria in 2011, and how conditions within the SAA have toughened for new conscripts, contributing to an increasing aversion to serving. Additionally, the study seeks to highlight the heavy burden that the idea and practice of the mandatory draft is on the lives of everyday Syrians both within and outside of Syria, by assessing the conditions for conscripts within the SAA, violations of GoS' legislation and amnesties, and prospects of returning to Syria for draft avoiders and defectors. In regard to the latter, we also aim to illustrate how military conscription is a parameter that cuts across almost all parameters for the return of refugees to Syria.

This study also aims to show that the SAA did not suddenly become a dreaded machine after the eruption of the civil war in Syria, but has used the war in order to manifest its full violent tendencies inwardly and outwardly. The massacre in Hama by state forces which took the lives of an estimated 40,000 Syrians is one of the biggest pre-war examples of the SAA's use of force against its own civilian population. More contemporarily, the SAA has been accused of infringing human rights during the conflict on several occasions, amongst others by cracking down on peaceful protests and resorting to the use of chemical weapons against civilians.⁴ Throughout the conflict, GoS-forces has consistently used prohibited weapons against civilian populations, such as improvised chlorine munitions and cluster munitions.⁵ The GoS and pro-GoS forces have also targeted numerous medical facilities and ambulances, as well as schools and other civilian infrastructure, with airstrikes, leaving behind a trail of casualties among women and children. Attacks against humanitarian relief personnel have also been reported.⁶ Recently, it has been reported that Syrian-Russian military forces are openly retaliating against civilians in areas of Idlib province that has been recently taken over by the GoS.⁷

This study seeks to give a voice to those who were adversely affected by the machine of repression represented in the SAA, and how the mandatory conscription is a main way to keep adding fuel to the fire of this machine. Ultimately, this study aims at having these voices contribute to increasing overall awareness about the realities of military conscription in Syria, and the need for protection for Syrian males that were forced to flee Syria because of it. The latter is particularly important given that there is a general tendency to focus more on women and children in protection programs, often for good reasons, yet men should not be excluded and have their own particular needs that should be considered.

1. The terms 'military conscription', 'compulsory military draft' and 'mandatory military service' have similar meanings and are used interchangeably throughout the report.

2. Women can also enlist voluntarily. "TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law" The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.

3. For some further reading on how military conscription has led to the displacement of, and consequently affects the return of refugees to Syria, refer to: "Unpacking Return" SAWA; Araman & Loutfi, Shaza "Return to Syria after Evading Conscription" Forced Migration Review; "TIMEP Brief: Conscription Law" The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy; World Bank Group (2020): "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis"

4. "A/HRC/34/CRP.3" Human Rights Council. 10 March 2017. For a timeline of significant events related to Syria's chemical weapons program from July 2012 to the present, also see <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>

5. "A/HRC/34/CRP.3" Human Rights Council. 10 March 2017.

6. Ibid.

7. "Syria: Government Forces Apparently Abuse Civilians" Human Rights Watch. 16 March 2020.

2 Scope of the Research

The focus of this exploratory research was on how **military conscription by the SAA** influences Syrians' lives and prospects. Through a qualitative approach, Basmeh & Zeitooneh aimed to understand the lived realities of Syrians' facing or affected by conscription. Semi-structured interviews⁸ were conducted with individuals who served, or refused to serve, in the SAA. A literature review was conducted to understand the nuance and the context, along with key informant interviews with experts. The majority of respondents are currently residing in Lebanon, with a minority in Syria, Turkey and the Netherlands.

The main respondents consisted of **12 men who served in the SAA** (referred to as "respondents that served") – two of whom deserted their service later on, and one of whom defected to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in 2012; along with **13 men who are of military age but did not serve in the SAA** (referred to as respondents that evaded the draft), and **8 women** whose direct family members were affected by the military conscription.

Disclaimer regarding the research methodology

Reaching individuals who had defected and were willing to do an interview was difficult; the researchers were able to reach one respondent who did defect to the FSA.

The research sample of respondents includes individuals with different political affiliations and from diverse backgrounds who served prior to 2011, or who evaded, deserted or defected. However, the sample does not include any current conscripts with a strong affiliation with, or that are strongly supportive of the GoS, nor with higher-ranking SAA or GoS officials.

Reporting on the adverse effect of military conscription on women was particularly challenging as obviously, a multitude of factors affect their conditions and return prospects, rendering it hard to filter out the impact of military conscription.

8. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires ensured consistency across respondents' answers, but simultaneously left space for gaining additional insights from respondents that were not included in the original questionnaires.

Respondents who served



Average Age 38 Years Old



Summoning

All were summoned in the years prior to the conflict, ranging from 1990-2010.



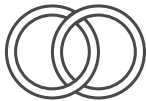
Branch of service

10 respondents reported to have served in the SAA ground forces, and one reported to have served in the National Defense Forces.



Length of serving

One-and-a-half to three years on average, and one reported to have served for 5 years (part of which during war time).



Civil status

Eight reported to be married, one reported to be single, and two did not report.



Breadwinner

Of the 12 respondents, at least eight who were married reported to be the main breadwinners of their families.



Education

Five respondents reported that they did not finish their primary education, while two respondents reported that they did. Three reported that they finished their secondary education, and only one respondent reported that he had finished a university degree.

Respondents who did not serve



Average Age 30 Years Old



Summoning

All except for one, who did not receive an official summon himself, were summoned when the conflict had already broken out (which had a large impact on their willingness – or lack thereof – to serve, as this report further illustrates below).



Civil status and Breadwinner

Four respondents reported to be married and were also the main breadwinner of the family, four others reported to be single and also not the breadwinners of their households.



Education

Eight of the men reported to have finished university, one of the men reported to have finished a technical secondary school degree, and of four it is unknown.

3 Background

3.1 What does military conscription in Syria entail?

Article 46 of the Syrian constitution describes military conscription as a “sacred duty”, whereby “defending the territorial integrity of the homeland and maintaining the secrets of the state shall be a duty of every citizen”.⁹ The main law regulating conscription in Syria, (Decree 115 of 1952) specified the different types of service, mainly: conscription, drafting, and the reserves.¹⁰ The legislative decrees and laws concerning military conscription were amended several times since their inception. Most notably, in 2007, Presidential Decree 30 replaced Decree 115, dictating that Syrian males are liable for military conscription at the age of 18 until the age of 42 for a total of 24 months. It is also stated that deferral of service is possible for different reasons, particularly education.

The service period was later reduced from 24 to 18 months in 2011.¹¹ According to Reuters, this reduction in the service period was “seen as an attempt to address discontent” in the population, “especially among the youth who resent state tactics to bring them into service.”¹² However, men who have not completed the fifth grade were still reported to continue to perform 21 months of service instead of 18.¹³

The age range specified within Decree 30 is not always respected with instances of individuals up to the age of 50 being conscripted and minors being allowed to volunteer.¹⁴ The UN Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also conducted a study that discussed the conscription of men over the age of 42, and concludes that “it is unclear whether the age limit has been raised as part of a government policy or if it instead is happening on a case by case basis.” According to UNHCR, it is most probably on a more local level that the SAA has deviated from specific conscription norms, where local chains of command ‘call the shots’ without the need for reporting to higher authorities.¹⁵

3.2 Structure of the SAA

It is estimated that, prior to the conflict in 2011, around 216,000 Syrian males reached the age of conscription annually¹⁶ and that there were an estimated 295,000 active personnel and 314,000 reservists, in addition to an estimated 108,000 members in the paramilitary forces. Syria’s active forces consist mainly of its ground forces – the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) – followed by the Air Defense, Air Force, and Navy.¹⁷

9. “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” FAKTA Project. 14 December 2018.

10. <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/SD08/msf/m115-1953.pdf>

11. US 10 Mar. 2014; SANA 19 Mar. 2011; Reuters 19 Mar. 2011.

12. *Ibid.*

13. US 10 Mar. 2014; SANA 19 Mar. 2011.

14. *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* Danish Refugee Council. May 2017.

15. *Ibid.*

16. “Country Profile: Syria” Library of Congress - Federal Division. <https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Syria-new.pdf>

17. “Syria’s Military Capabilities and Options for Military Intervention” Center for Militære Studie - Københavns Universitet. June 2019.

11. US 10 Mar. 2014; SANA 19 Mar. 2011; Reuters 19 Mar. 2011.

12. *Ibid.*

13. US 10 Mar. 2014; SANA 19 Mar. 2011.

14. *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* Danish Refugee Council. May 2017.

15. *Ibid.*

16. “Country Profile: Syria” Library of Congress - Federal Division. <https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Syria-new.pdf>

17. “Syria’s Military Capabilities and Options for Military Intervention” Center for Militære Studie - Københavns Universitet. June 2019.

Several paramilitary forces have also been involved in the Syrian civil war, alongside the SAA. Members of these paramilitary organizations are also hired by the GoS and paid a salary higher than that of base officers, which is around 400\$ a month.¹⁸ While conscripts are usually conscripted into the SAF, the GoS made an exception during the war that allowed conscripts to serve their conscription time with certain paramilitary organizations, such as the Fifth Corps. Registration with the Fifth Corps as an alternative for military conscription has been common in reconciled communities,¹⁹ with individuals staying in their home region, rather than traveling to the north of Syria after the GoS regained control over the area. In Dar'a Governorate for instance, the Fifth Corps is mainly utilized to keep potential fighters in the governorate under the guidance of Russia, allowing the GoS and its allies to curb any potential of another military rebellion or uprising in Southern Syria.²⁰

Another paramilitary force is the National Defence Forces (NDF).²¹ In principle, serving in the NDF is not an alternative to conscription, yet there have been several reports of men opting to join the NDF instead of the SAF. One of the reasons reported for that is the ability to accumulate wealth through illegal activities such as looting or extortion of local communities they are active in, without any repercussions from the army.²²

18. Kheder Khaddour. "Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace - Middle East Center*. 14 March 2016.

19. These reconciliation 'agreements' were considered as truces between the GoS and any opposition group that held a specific area in Syria. Reconciliation is viewed by the GoS as being part of a larger "regime survival strategy" in asserting its control over formerly opposition held areas. These agreements ranged from compromises where even after GoS take-over of opposition held areas, many of the same opposition actors were allowed to stay in control of security and governance roles in their area, to cases where reconciliation has led to full scale evacuation of large areas formerly held by the opposition.

20. "Reconciled Militants Included in Three Military Formations in Daraa" *Enab Baladi*. 20 October 2018.

21. The NDF is a pro-government militia, created through the merging of pro-Assad armed groups in 2012. For further information, see: Aaron Lund "Who are the Pro-Assad Militias" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace - Middle East Center*. 2 March 2015.

22. *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* Danish Immigration Service. August 2017.

4 Main Data Findings

4.1 The SAA's Involvement in the War

4.1.1 Scramble for manpower

The SAA began its military operations against insurgents and armed opposition groups only months after the start of the 2011 uprising. Due to the unprecedented protests that started taking place in most Syrian Governorates in March 2011, and amid fears of further escalations, President Assad issued Decree 104 in August, declaring a state of war.²³ To secure the increased number of conscripts and reservists needed, the GoS issued a decision in March 2012 banning all Syrian males of conscription age (18 - 42) from leaving the country without a written permission acquired from the Conscription Department. This was strictly enforced, with men being turned back at the airport and border crossings while attempting to leave the country.²⁴

The travel ban on Syrian males of conscription age continued to be upheld with minimal changes in the years since. This speaks to the need for manpower as the war progressed and as the SAA rapidly lost soldiers due to casualties – the number of active personnel diminished from 295,000 to 178,000 by September 2014, with that number further decreasing to just 142,000 per 2019 estimates.²⁵

Another approach implemented by the SAA to maintain its ranks, is to keep men in the service even after their official service period has ended, refusing to discharge them and keeping individuals up to 50 years of age in service.²⁶ As a result of this practice, some conscripts are still waiting to be discharged after almost eight years in the service. In 2017, a group of conscripts, some of whom had been in the service as early since 2010, started an online campaign demanding to be discharged after their service had been extended indefinitely.²⁷

Additionally, at least one of our respondents reported that he was enlisted a second time by the Syrian authorities, despite having finished his service prior to the conflict. Several KIs confirmed this phenomenon and also noted that people who had just finished their military conscription as well as veterans of the SAA – who have made a career of serving in the army – had been called upon to re-enlist in the SAA, mainly as reservists. Given the heightened need for manpower, being enlisted in the reserves equates to actively serving.

4.1.2 Weakening of the GoS' rules for exemptions and deferrals

Since the start of the conflict, grounds for exemption and deferrals became limited with the GoS following a stricter process in granting such privileges. Decree 30 of 2007, the main legislative piece that constitutes the properties of conscription and postponement or exemptions of the service, states that individuals who can showcase their status as breadwinners can be exempted from service if those who are exempted can continuously prove that they are eligible for exemption year after year. However, it is notable that the GoS has not followed this procedure consistently since the start of the conflict. An example of such inconsistencies in the exemption thresholds by the GoS recently affected postgraduate students, who found their conscription deferral removed without any warnings.²⁸

23. "Syrian President Issues Decree Adjusting the military conscription Law" SANA. 6 August 2014.

24. "Forbidding males under the age of 42 from leaving Syria without proper authorization" al-Wasat. 12 May 2017. <http://www.alwasat-news.com/news/645948.html>

25. "Comparison Between the Syrian and Turkish Armies" www.arabic.cnn.com. 31 October 2019. <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2019/10/31/weapons-explainer-turkey-vs-syria>

26. "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" Danish Refugee Council. May 2017. <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20161/alm-del/UUI/bilag/230/1780523.pdf>.

27. "Syrian Regime Soldiers Once Again: We Want to Be Discharged" the Syrian Observer. 10 June 2019.

28. "Syria: Changes to Legal Exemptions from Compulsory Service, Including Implementation" Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. 18 September 2017.

In 2014, Decree 33 was enacted, which set the exemption fees from the service for Syrian citizens who have previously resided in Syria but currently live abroad at an amount of 8,000 USD, and for Syrians who were born and lived abroad their entire lives at 2,500 USD.²⁹ These exemption fees cause an obstacle for anyone who does not want to serve but cannot afford the exemption fee, especially amid the harsh economic realities that both Syria and its neighboring countries are experiencing. Several respondents and KIs confirmed the barrier that this high fee posed to them, in addition to some of them not being willing to pay it, even if they could, to such a corrupt and inhumane regime.

While certain individuals are granted a renewable one-year deferral from conscription for continuing education or work reasons, the fear of being arrested while waiting for an exemption has prompted many Syrians to escape the country.

Moreover, another example of a violation concerns students, who were normally conscripted at the end of their academic year. That rule has changed, and students became conscripted as soon as they finished their exams, without the slightest grace period. Students at diploma level (for instance to become a teacher) were no longer able to defer their service. Age caps were also added to the deferral system, rendering it impossible for students above the age of 29 to claim deferral due to university studies.

These findings are backed up by our respondents. Only one respondent who served reported being able to obtain a deferral to postpone his service before he served, while **three respondents who also served reported that none of their exemption requests were approved, stating that the reasons behind the refusals were unclear.** Only four respondents got an official exemption: one for medical reasons, two by paying the exemption fees (one respondent reported having paid 2,000 USD, as the fee was lower in 2007 than it is now, where it is based at USD 8,000), and one because he could prove he was the main provider of the family.

Furthermore, having valid reasons for deferral or exemption is also not a guarantee that a person will in fact be (temporarily) exempted and is not at risk of being conscripted. While military booklets³⁰ or deferment papers would usually be acknowledged by authorities – sometimes in retrospect - there was still a chance of being arbitrarily detained at checkpoints despite the fact of presenting their military deferment papers (as reported by our respondents in Damascus and Rural Damascus). The documents of proof would be destroyed, and men would be detained and drafted into the army. One KI maintains that people with deferrals and exemptions were being detained at the height of the war, however this phenomenon seems to have decreased over time.

As one KI stated:

“Many people who returned after paying their exemption fees and fines were arrested for previous actions of political dissent, proving that actual exemption does not hold much weight.”

Moreover, one respondent from this study that avoided the draft recalled mass arrests by the military police of anyone suspected of having deserted or evaded:

“In 2014/2015 the military police started to arrest young people from the streets. My brother witnessed that and I immediately took him to Turkey. Our military notebooks are always in our pockets. But the military police stopped checking these notebooks and just arrested people. However, if they later find out the exemptions or deferral, they will return these people. I know a lot of people that this happened to, and they were released.”

29. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=34735>

30. A military booklet is issued by the Syrian Ministry of Defence, which records all events and duties of the bearer throughout his military service, including whether he is entitled to exemption or deferral of service as well as location(s) of deployment. Syrian males must carry this booklet with them at all times, so that the authorities can at any time check their details and see if any violation has been committed. See: “Syria: Update on Military Service, Mandatory Self-Defence Duty, and Recruitment to the YPG” Danish Refugee Council, September 2015.

4.1.3 Increasing reluctance to serve

With the protests that first erupted in 2011 and the resulting declaration of the state of war; the meaning of conscription changed. Once an obligation, something that all males had to go through - considered to be a waste of time by some but seen by others as an interesting opportunity to widen their horizons, a chance to learn discipline, and prove themselves³¹ – military conscription has become a tool the GoS uses against its own population, pitting mandatorily conscripted citizens against their own communities. While a generalization cannot be made about every person within the SAA, the responses gathered through this research are illustrative of a growing disdain for the military conscription after the outbreak of war. Military conscription was no longer something that Syrian men of a certain age simply had to get over with or pay an exemption fee to avoid doing. It became something that they dreaded. One respondent who does not support the idea of war and violence, and thus evaded the service explained:

“The Syrian Army’s activities entail a lot of activities that I don’t believe in. The same is true for the Free Syrian Army... [I] just don’t believe that the bullet will achieve a goal. The Free Syrian Army and Islamic factions have been corrupted in a way that is similar to the Syrian Arab Army. They [FSA and Islamic factions] also exploit for their own benefits. They may have started for a noble purpose but lost that. This is why I am not supporting any side in Syria.”

Many men who were interviewed chose to evade or desert the service because they did not want to be part of what has increasingly become a ‘cleansing’ of opposition views by the GoS, with the SAA as its main apparatus for doing so. As one respondent who evaded the draft put it:

“I didn’t want to be part of the army structure that was fighting its own people.”

Four respondents that served also reiterated their stance about the violence of the military. One respondent noted that:

“The service [was] one of the worst experiences in my life. It is not about [national] service but about [national] agony.”

Another respondent added that military conscription in Syria is a form of ***“extreme suffering.”***

While the GoS claims to consider military conscription to be “a factor in creating a unified Syrian identity while retaining a significant army”,²⁵ the army’s corruption and involvement in the Syrian civil war has severely impacted the way Syrian citizens view it. This was further exacerbated by several factors. Firstly, the GoS’ use of both local and foreign militias and paramilitary forces during the Syrian civil war led to power imbalances within specific communities where several actors affiliated with the GoS vied for control of the same area, with the SAA facilitating the control of different local and foreign militias and paramilitary forces on different areas. Secondly, the SAA’s heavy reliance on Alawite members, especially in the higher ranks³² has further underlined sectarian tensions.³³

31. As explained by a number of respondents in this study.

32. The Assads belong to the Alawite confessional group, which often privileges communities and public service members who are also Alawites.

33. Main opposition groups were overwhelmingly Sunni, which has come at a disadvantage to Sunni communities who are now viewed with more suspicion by the regime than other confessional groups.

4.2 The Lived Realities of Mandatory Conscription

Building upon the previous chapter that illustrated how the SAA became an active force in the conflict, with its structure and mandate expanding beyond what it was prior to 2011, this section illustrates the consequences of this changing role on the realities of those who served, as well as those who chose not to. This section will use the testimonies of respondents to illuminate the inner workings of the SAA and the consequences on the physical, psycho-social, and material well-being of those who serve. Furthermore, the section will provide an insight into the reality of evasion, as well as the psychological impact that evasion from military conscription – which is considered a crime – holds for those who chose not to serve.

The reality of life within the SAA, as well as what it represents to many Syrians, has therefore led to a general sense of hesitancy regarding serving amongst a large segment of Syrians. When asked how they felt about serving, 7 out of 12 men who did serve, all of whom were summoned years prior to the Syrian conflict, were neutral about performing their military conscription. **Interestingly, five respondents indicated their view on serving and the army changed while in service**; four because conditions were different - tougher, more unjust - than they had expected. The respondents who reported to be unwilling to serve from the moment they were summoned, pointed to the physical and mental violence of army superiors with their inferiors, especially new conscripts. Practices of beating and humiliation are commonplace within this context, for example.

4.2.1 Inadequate training of new conscripts

One of the main ways in which the changing role of the SAA can be seen materially is through understanding the way training for conscripts has also changed. When respondents who served were asked if they received adequate training prior to joining specific brigades, handling heavy weaponry or being sent to frontlines, **6 out of 12 respondents reported that this was not the case**. However, this perception is not entirely new. Respondents who served before the outbreak of war already reported experiencing poor training, however the duration of training seems to have decreased significantly after 2011.

Indicatively, one respondent who served reported that:

“Currently, [the] training phase for conscripts isn't adequate, [it is] shorter in time [than it was before 2011] and lacks a specialization phase of training.”

This shortening of the duration of training for some conscripts could be attributed to the GoS's impatience in getting men onto the battlefield as quickly as possible as the territorial wars with various opposition groups advanced. Another conscript noted that:

“Training was not adequate. You mainly learn discipline in the army [...] rather than skills. Regular training is three months. Very tough, conscripts are treated like animals and cursed at.”

This was echoed by other KIs:

“Training for conscripted individuals used to be six months, now [it is] down to just a month in some cases. [The] first three months usually included general training while the remainder three months included the specialization phase where conscripts would specialize in using certain weapons. [...] Drafted individuals are [now] forced to use weapons and join brigades they're not specialized or trained for due to the strained resources during the war.”

Only two respondents who served reported that their training was adequate; however, one of these respondents reported never having to deal with heavy weaponry. One respondent emphasized how the “one size fit all” training of the SAA is in any way not ideal because some individuals may just need more time than others to learn essential skills.

One respondent who served explained that **“most people have three months of training only before they go to the battlefield. Because I had a diploma, I got training for six months”**, hinting at discrepancies in training based on one’s level of education, and on rank.

When asked whether “some conscripts receive better training than others”, only four respondents reported that the training did not differ as far as they knew, while **five respondents reported that their training did differ to some of their co-conscripts**, hinting at how preferential treatment for certain sects or backgrounds does play a role in the training phase as the SAA.

The above illuminates two nuances that our respondents touch upon: first, that an inadequate training period does not make for well-equipped soldiers, and second that there is discrimination within the training program itself.

Due to the lack of adequate training and weaponry available, it has indeed been observed that novice fighters are disproportionately killed in battle.³⁴ As a result of the fatalities, a comparison between the demographics data of 2010 and 2019 shows that while Syria had a male population greater than that of its female population prior to the conflict, a swing of 2 to 3% took place with females outnumbering males after the start of the conflict. This showcases the gender imbalance caused by the death and departure of men in the conflict.³⁵ In certain, exceptional areas, there is only one man for every seven women.³⁶

4.2.2 Discrimination within the SAA

While the SAA is supposed to be a secular institution, discrimination, mainly along sectarian lines, is reported to be widespread, especially after 2011. **At least seven who served reported that there was preferential treatment based on sectarian grounds.** One respondent mentioned that many conscripts would not present themselves to the service **“if they could afford paying bribes or if they were Alawites”**.

Another respondent mentioned that the “SAA had sectarian, ethnic, and classist tensions and discrimination, even before the war. Now [it is] worse,” adding that: “High positions in SAA are disproportionately held by Alawites.”

One respondent who defected from the SAA noted that:

“My experience in the military was that the priority in everything was for the people of Al Assad’s sect, in all advantages and positions. Although we were not sectarian, he was raising them to be like that. We pledged the [military] oath that we swore, but they never followed it.”

Another respondent who served noted that Shiite and Alawi members of the SAA were given more authority than Sunni members, where he remarks that it was tough to be in the SAA “as a Sunni”. Hence while praying and talking of religion, and thus display of religious affiliation or preference is prohibited during service, conscripts are still discriminated against based on their sectarian background.

Paying bribes is common to receive any of the basic benefits that conscripts are entitled to, such as leave days or being able to follow a university course on the side. One respondent who served but eventually deserted explains how much time, money and convincing power he needed to use every time he had to get permission to go to university. Eventually, partially also because of the enormous difficulty he experienced studying in the military camp, he gave up on university.

34. Ola, Ghaith “The Battle of Tadmor: Regime Soldiers Desert as they are being killed” All4Syria.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20161213161224/http://all4syria.info:80/Archive/370028>

35. H NAP, November 2019

36. Al-Mounes, Maher. “Syria’s ‘era of women’: War leaves streets empty of men” Middle East Eye. 14 August 2018.

A respondent who served noted that:

“Discrimination in the army is pre-existing, even in hospitals and media institutions. Doctors started killing Alawi injured soldiers out of anger. This does not happen anymore, as the regime controls everything. Discrimination is everywhere in Syrian society.”

4.2.3 Draft evasion

Along with an unwillingness to serve comes the reality that many men of conscription age will attempt to evade the draft to escape the conditions that are represented in the SAA. Per the 1960 Military Criminal Code, during peacetime, conscription evaders face one to six months in prison before being forced to serve their military tenure. During war time however, evaders face up to five years in prison. Even though such terms have often not been followed since the start of the conflict - with evaders usually being sent directly to the military without having to serve their prison sentence - the risk of detention for evaders has not subsided.

In addition to those currently detained, the head of Air Force Intelligence, Jamil Hassan, stated in a private meeting that there were three million names on Syria’s ‘wanted lists’, representing 12.5 percent of Syria’s pre-war population. These lists include those individuals wanted for military conscription. While these numbers cannot be fully verified, they are not inconceivable based on other available sources.³⁷ The persistent awareness of being liable to punishment obviously takes a psychological toll on those who choose to evade, even if these men have settled in other countries.

Furthermore, in December 2019, the GoS announced an amendment to military service law, Law 97, This amendment entails that assets and properties of individuals accused of avoiding or deserting their military duties can be seized unless they are able to pay the hefty service pardoning fee of 8,000 USD.³⁸ However, the parameters of accusation here remain unclear.

Main reasons for avoiding the draf

Throughout the conflict, men of different political allegiances were drafted to the SAA, and, as a result, military aged men wishing to avoid conscription regularly tried to flee Syria, or move inside Syria to more remote areas Syria.³⁹

The main reasons for avoiding the draft as reported by the interviewees was that they did not want to be part of a military apparatus that “killed its own people.” One respondent who evaded the draft explains:

“Even though it [the military] is very humiliating, I wanted to go there. Because my father’s experience was a lot better than other men’s experiences. He was in Inspection division, he was always asked for his opinion and he had a good experience. Hence, I wanted to try that and learn new things, but I could not because when I was called to serve, the revolution had already started, [by the] end of 2012.

I no longer wanted to serve because:

- 1. I hate carrying weapons, I am peaceful.***
- 2. I don’t know whom I should fight there. I am a paramedic working around the clock to save lives. No way I can be in this army, given its role in the revolution. We had seen the army’s actions before in Hama.”***

³⁷“Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks, and Information Scarcity” European Institute of Peace. July 2019, p 12.

³⁸“Syria Update” COAR. 6 January 2020.

³⁹Ahmad, Alia. “On the Syrian Coast, Government Supporters, but...” Syria Untold. 18 June 2016.

Moreover, almost all of the respondents who did not serve mentioned that serving in the army would have contradicted their beliefs and values, especially if they were supportive of the revolution. One respondent who did not serve noted that:

“I decided not to serve due to the revolution against the regime. As a matter of principles, we cannot serve in the Syrian regime. In case I was obliged to serve, I would desert from the army, and this is why I did not show up.”

Another respondent who did not serve mentioned the material costs of joining the army would be too high, giving examples of not having enough money to bribe officers. At least three respondents who did not serve mentioned that they would rather have completed their university degrees and pay the 8,000 USD exemption fee than serve in the army. The majority of the respondents that evaded managed to first defer the service for a couple of years due to university studies and then went abroad, to Lebanon or Turkey, because they wanted to avoid the draft, and/or because they wanted to leave Syria anyway as a result of the ongoing conflict and security issues. Clearly, often a combination of these two, and other, factors come into play.

The increasing unwillingness to serve has led to military-age males to evade the draft, and to leave Syria. Political opposition to the GoS not only saw individuals evade the draft, but also saw an estimated 100,000 SAA soldiers desert their duties and join opposition groups such as the Free Syrian Army instead, according to July 2014 estimates.⁴⁰

4.2.4 Desertion and defection

The conditions within the SAA have also led many who have been conscripted and served to desert or defect from the SAA whilst they were serving. Deserters from the army face even greater punishment than evaders, with penalties varying on the differing circumstances, including torture, physical assaults, and forced disappearance.⁴¹ KIs interviewed for this study explained how human rights abuses such as killing civilians, theft, and looting, among others are factors that have been noted as incentives for defection. Similarly, a former SAA member interviewed by Basmeih & Zeitooneh, whom has since defected and joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA), reported that a “massacre” took place in his hometown, whereby:

“Live bullets were fired at a peaceful march that was the funeral of a martyr who was shot by the army. Its victims were more than 150 wounded and martyrs.”

He cited this incident as one of many that led him to defect. He explained:

“I and six officers had decided to defect. We used to meet while we were swimming in the sea where no ears or walls to hear us, where the slogan back then was “the walls have ears.” And we decided to defect during our service in the city of Latakia. We left behind that burden that was weighing on us with grief and pain over what was happening.”

By late 2011, the FSA was the main Syrian military defectors group. The group's formation was a reaction to GoS brutality against peaceful mass protests, which led to increasing numbers of disobedience within the SAA, desertion, and defection to what would become the FSA, which aimed to be the military wing of the Syrian people's opposition to the GoS. Defectors include individuals of all ranks, from conscript to brigadier general, and from a wide variety of combat units and organizations within the SAA. Some small units defected in their entirety. In some cases, the defectors took their weapons with them. Since 2012 however, amongst other factors, a fragmented structure and infighting, a decrease in funding and the rise of a plethora of Islamic armed forces weakened the FSA and fighters have started to leave.⁴²

40. Dorothy Ohl, Holger Albrecht, and Kevin Koehler. “For Money or Liberty? The Political Economy of Military Desertion and Rebel Recruitment in the Syrian Civil War.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 24 November 2015.

41. “Syria: Reactions against Evaders and Deserters”

42. Al Shimale, Zouhair & Adam Lucente “Free Syrian Army Decimated by Desertions” Al Jazeera. 11 November 2015.

Furthermore, soldiers interviewed by Human Rights Watch spoke about witnessing and participating in shooting and injuring dozens of protesters as well as committing acts of arbitrary arrests and detention of hundreds. Explicit orders by high ranking officials in the Army to soldiers ordering them to shoot at protestors were a normality, with one of the interviewed conscripts stating that he was deployed as a sniper in Dar'a Governorate with the main responsibility of shooting at protestors. Conscripts who refused to shoot at protestors were shot on the spot by other SAA members, one of the defectors claimed.

A former member of the SAA's Special Forces Regiment stated that security forces regularly participated in the detention and assault of large numbers of people, including children who looked as young as 12. Additionally, incidents of looting and theft were widespread, with soldiers having to collect valuables and cash they would find during raids and handing it over to their superiors.

The Dark Side of the Free Syrian Army

While one respondent reported having defected to the FSA, some other respondents reported being victims of the practices of the FSA at the time they were conscripts of the SAA.

One respondent who served mentions that "friends have been kidnapped and tortured during their leave [...] by the Free Syrian Army." He goes on to talk more specifically about defections from the SAA to the FSA, adding that "In the second year of the war, all Sunna Muslims needed to leave the army, because otherwise they would be caught by the Free Syrian Army."

One respondent who did not serve in the SAA reported that he did not want to join the ranks of the FSA either. Regarding his decision, he explains that "The Syrian Army's activities entail a lot of activists that I don't believe in. The same is true for the Free Syrian Army by the way. Just don't believe in that the bullet will achieve a goal. The Free Syrian Army has been corrupted, and Islamic factions, similar to the Syrian Army. Also exploiting for their own benefits. They may have started for a noble purpose but lost that."

Desertion

Three out of the nine respondents that served during war time reported having deserted the draft; two directly due to the outbreak of conflict in 2011 and the fact that they did not want to take part in armed conflict, and one reportedly mainly due to family pressure, as the family was worried about him serving during war. All these respondents had started serving prior to the war, but their service had extended into war time.

A Deserter's Experience

"I wanted to resume my university and also keep a shop. During my service, I also sold perfume together with a business partner who was not in the army. So he could maintain the shop, but I did need to go to the market once a month. Having a shop is not allowed so I always needed to give my boss and another officer a present to have them leave me alone. When I once forgot that, they immediately took all my stuff and I needed to buy everything back myself.

I did not see a future in Syria anymore. Education is really bad, and I know many people with a university degree but no job.

Fleeing is very challenging and risky, but again I was lucky. I fled with a friend who is from near Qamishli, North East Syria. His family lived there too, and he was serving with me. So we made the plan to flee there together and then go to Turkey; my friend could help me.

I “bought” leave, a fake paper. Because of this I made it to Qamishli. Going from Qamishli to Turkey was a whole struggle too. I still do not believe it ended well; it could have gone wrong at so many moments.

I have an older brother with a slight disability, who was therefore exempted from military service. I used his ID card to reach Ayn Arab, and then Turkey. Since I only had my military ID, I needed to use my brother’s ID.

I ran into the Free Syrian Army ..., but because I had my brother’s ID with me, they would leave me alone. I also ran into the YPG, which captured me. But when they found out I had fled the SAA, they would actually help me. They gave me a place to sleep, and 1 person helped me reach Turkey. I have a very good experience with Kurds. When I arrived in Turkey, I went to people that I still know. They helped me get a job in Istanbul, as I was not registered with UNHCR.

I cannot and do not want to return to Syria. I also went through a tough time in Turkey and faced many hardships. I met bad people that treated me poorly.

Hence I decided I wanted to go far away from these places, to Iceland. But when I arrived in Belgium, I was out of money and decided to go to the Netherlands.

I don’t want anything to do with the army and with Syria. Until now, it’s giving me nightmares. Dreams that I am taken back to the army. My last nightmare was 5 months ago. I felt like a slave for 5 years, which is a terribly negative feeling. It felt like an eternity.

I lost everything in Syria: my friends, studies, and family, so nothing there for me anymore.”

–Ahmad Katta, 28. Defected from the SAA in 2015.

4.2.5 Impact of military conscription on livelihoods

Finally, it is important to consider the livelihoods of those who serve as well as their families’. Since Decree 20 of December 2018, salary raises were instituted for SAF conscripts; these range from 50,000-80,000 SYP⁴³ per month (approximately 22- 36 USD⁴⁴). This salary increase was made in order to accommodate for the rising costs of living in Syria, calculated at around 332,000 SYP per month per 2019 estimates (around 150 USD, nearly five times the average SAF member salary)⁴⁵ amid its economic crisis and the Syrian currency’s value deterioration. These salaries are still extremely low considering the high cost of living in Syria – estimated at roughly five times higher per 2019 estimates – as well as the economic crisis and devaluation of the Syrian pound.

Conscripts who are the sole breadwinner for their household should in principle be exempted from service. However, having a family member serve can nevertheless lead to a significant reduction in income earning power for a family. When asked if their income while serving sufficed to cover their basic needs, **six out of the 12 respondents who served reported that their salary did not suffice to cover their own essential costs.** One of these explained how his service negatively affected the livelihood situation of his family, as he was the main provider but was refused an exemption.

43. “Syrian Officers’ Salaries after the Final Increase” www.shaatimes.com, 24 December 2018. shorturl.at/suyC5

44. As per the Oct 2020 black market rate of 2,200 SYP to 1 USD. Information on the current exchange rate of the SYP to USD can be found at: <https://b2b-sy.com/>.

45. “Monthly Living Costs Reaches 332,000 Syrian Pounds” *The Syrian Observer*. 25 July 2019.

By contrast, when asked whether the livelihood and living conditions of a conscript would be affected by their time in the service, two respondents mentioned that serving improved the livelihood situation of their families slightly. Other respondents were single or not the main provider, so it did not have a significant impact. However, one respondent mentioned that the condition of his family was negatively affected by his time serving:

“It was hard. The family could not support itself. Very poor living conditions, and sometimes we could not afford our bread. That’s why we would evade [the service] to work for a short period so we could support our parents and family”.

Very notable, **eight out of 12 men who served indicated that they were not able to finish their education before being drafted.** These eight respondents did not go back to school after serving and thus the military draft had a large impact on their access to future jobs.

Of the female respondents who were interviewed, three respondents reported that their husband’s SAA income was not enough to cover the cost of their living expenses, worsening the socio-economic situation of the family. Breadwinners should officially be exempted from the military service, but respondents across our study confirm how this was not always respected.

Furthermore, most conscripts were not compensated for any injuries that they sustained while in service. When asked whether the conscripts would receive financial compensation for the time they were unable to serve as a result of a military conscription related injury, eight respondents who served answered that they would not, and would only receive a short “rest period.” One respondent who answered negatively, noted that ***“it was a service beyond one’s ability with no mercy and arduous tasks.”*** Only three respondents reported receiving compensation, but noted that it was very limited, the equivalent of around 30 EUR.

Temporary evasion during the service for the sake of livelihood

Even among those that did fulfill their service and may not have had ambitions to desert, temporary evasion occurred: four respondents that did serve reported they would evade once or multiple times during their time in the army, and they reported punishment upon return. For example, one of our respondents reported evading temporarily for work

“I would evade a lot to work and earn money to support the family. Upon my service resumption, I would be punished, beaten and imprisoned sometimes. I would bribe the officer to avoid being beaten as my body cannot resist it.”

As described above, getting your leave permits in a legal manner was often challenging, therefore either temporary evasion or bribing were often the only options to be able to leave for a short while.

4.3 Impossibility of Returning to Syria

As has become clear from the sections above and is echoed in other research reports by Syrian civil society, INGOs and think tanks, military conscription has not only compelled many men to depart from Syria, but prospects of getting immediately conscripted, detained, or otherwise punished also act as a major impediment for the return of male refugees that evaded, deserted or defected from the draft. In previous research conducted by Basmeh & Zeitooneh, strong fear of men being drafted into military (reserve) service was reported as the most imminent deterrent to return across all focus groups, with a large part of both male and female respondents reporting that conscription was among their main concerns, if not the main reason for having fled Syria. Both mothers and men participating in the research expressed the constant anxiety they experience, even in Lebanon, as military conscription is hanging over their heads like a sword of Damocles.⁴⁶

All 13 respondents who evaded their compulsory military service reported being at high risk of detention or immediate conscription in Syria, rendering their return life-threatening and therefore impossible. Besides not being able – or willing – to return to Syria without awaiting immediate detention and/or being conscripted into the army, two respondents that avoided the draft reported being unable to obtain essential civil documentation, a passport renewal and a marriage registration, as a result of evading the draft. Some respondents explained how other factors, such as the overall lack of safety and security, and the poor socio-economic conditions in Syria, exacerbated by the deteriorating financial situation also impede their return to Syria, while others reiterated that the draft evasion played a key role.

“Draft avoiders are arrested or drafted, and mainly sent to frontlines without proper training or weapons”.

4.3.1 Protection from forced conscription

UNHCR has developed a **list of “protection thresholds”**, which serve as the internationally accepted standard to assess whether conditions in Syria are conducive for safe, voluntary and dignified return. These parameters are outlined in UNHCR’s overall policy on Syrian refugee return is outlined in the February 2018 “Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy” (CPSS) for Refugee Return to Syria. The CPSS outlines four criteria that need to be met inside Syria before UNHCR could move from “phase 1” (the current phase according to UNHCR as of October 2020) to “phase 2”, the phase in which UNHCR could start facilitating large-scale voluntary return. In addition to a durable cessation of hostilities, these thresholds touch upon, amongst others, physical, material and legal safety for returnees, guarantees that returnees will not face arbitrary arrest or detention; insurances than an individual’s decision to return is informed and genuinely voluntary. **UNHCR Protection Threshold 12 states that: “Returnees fully benefit from an amnesty in Syria, except for those that are charged with a serious violation of international humanitarian law, or a crime against humanity, or a crime constituting a serious violation of human rights, or a serious common crime involving death or serious bodily harm, committed prior to or during exile. The amnesty includes those who evaded compulsory military service or reservist service, have deserted from the armed forces, have joined a non-state armed group, and who left Syria illegally and/or lodged an asylum claim abroad.”**⁴⁷

A series of amnesties were indeed announced by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. On 9 October 2018, the GoS issued Decree 18, granting amnesty to individuals accused of deserting or avoiding military conscription.⁴⁸

46. “Drivers of Premature Return. Syrians’ Reflections on Displacement in Lebanon”, Basmeh & Zeitooneh, March 2019, p.22.

47. The central importance of the Protection Thresholds was also re-confirmed in the outcome document of the Brussels IV Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (co-organised by the EU and the UN on 30 June 2020), which stated that “participants reiterated the importance of the Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria, issued by the UN in February 2018. “Brussels IV Conference on ‘Supporting the future of Syria and the region’: co-chairs’ declaration”, 30 June 2020, Council of the European Union.

48. “Assad Army Launches Conscription Campaign in Eastern Ghouta” The Syrian Observer. 2 April 2019.

However, only a month later, the GoS published a list of 400,000 names of males born in 1980 or after wanted for military conscription, despite the fact that these individuals had previously been cleared from serving.⁴⁹ All KIs expressed their lack of faith in the amnesty, and in general the fragility of each decree, amnesty agreement, or reconciliation agreement announced and ‘implemented’ by the GoS: none of these, and in particular the military amnesty, hold much weight since they are constantly violated by the same bodies that initially proposed them.

A KI noted that:

“Firstly, the deserters amnesty was put in place in October 2018 and ran for four months for deserters who resided inside Syria and six months for deserters who were abroad. In Dar'a, the amnesty was often not respected, with many people that fell under it arrested. The amnesty was renewed for a further six months in June 2019. However, that did not stop the Government from arresting military age males with valid settlement agreements for other reasons such as being known to be political dissenters or opposition members against the government.”

In truth, amnesties are often used by the GoS as a means to recruit more fighters, or simply to demonstrate to the international community, donors or allies that the situation in Syria is improving and that the GoS is in control. The same can be said about reconciliation agreements. As one KI noted:

“Reconciliation agreements held were only used as a tool for the SAA to re-mobilize its forces, as observed with the Fifth Corps that was created in Dar'a, mainly consisting of reconciled opposition fighters, only to be moved to Idlib as part of the GoS forces.”

KIs consistently report how many of the reconciliation agreements resulted in forced conscription of reconciled fighters into the SAA, despite these fighters being promised a grace period. It was also reported that fighters from so-called reconciled communities were disproportionately sent to the frontlines after being conscripted into the SAA, as a form of punishment for their anti-regime activities.

4.3.2 Split returns

As a result of the disproportionately large burden of compulsory military service and heightened protection risks on men, split returns, whereby families return to Syria without all its members, has become a norm. In most cases, the females of the family return while the men stay behind in the host country. KIs explain that split returns to Syria are frequently due to men’s fears of being forcibly conscripted or detained upon return, despite the aforementioned amnesty. Even men that previously finished their official service sometimes fear being conscripted with the SAA, given that it is not uncommon that they get conscripted again - even after finishing the official service period. Hence from draft evaders, deserters and defectors to those men that finished their service prior to the war already: there is fear among Syrian men that they will be watched carefully by the security apparatus, and the consequences are unknown.

A similar trend was visible among refugee returnees in GoS-held areas, which Basmeh & Zeitooneh interviewed in the context of the Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) research.⁵⁰ 20% of the respondents (of 138 refugee returnees interviewed) reported to have undergone a split return, with either a husband, brother, or son having to stay behind in Lebanon, often related to fear of being detained or conscripted in Syria. However, KIs also express concern that the deteriorating financial and economic situation and the urgent lack of livelihood opportunities in the host countries, especially Lebanon, could still push Syrian males towards premature return despite the security threats and the compulsory draft.

49. “400,000 further wanted for Reserve Service” al-Modon. 23 November 2018. shorturl.at/pBGU8.

50. The Refugee Protection Watch, a coalition of organizations of which B&Z is the key research lead, assesses the living conditions of returnees to Syria, keeping in line with the UNHCR’s thresholds for safe return. For further reading refer to “Trapped in between Lebanon and Syria: the absence of durable solutions for Syrian refugees” Refugee Protection Watch, 15 October 2020.

In case of split returns, the female returnees are then forced to assume the role of the breadwinner for the family once back in Syria. While this is already considered challenging due to persistent local norms that men ought to be the breadwinner, rendering it difficult for women to access jobs, the current economic and financial hardships in Syria make it particularly difficult for female-headed households to make ends meet. An overwhelming majority of female respondents from the RPW study who had undertaken split returns also relied mainly on aid and remittances from relatives as their main sources of income. One of the KIs stated that the split returns results in returnees “working in illegal industries”, reiterating the difficulty for these women alone to acquire a decent job.

Conclusion

There is a need to look at the issue of military conscription not simply as a single parameter deterring a large number of Syrian men from returning to Syria in safety and dignity, but as an overarching systemic issue that permeates multiple aspects of the lives of Syrians, both within and outside of Syria.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate the negative impact on the psychological and socio-economic wellbeing of almost all of our respondents who did serve in the SAA, leading some of them to desert or defect. Moreover, respondents who refused to serve for freedom of conscience are impacted differently, but not less significantly. The findings of this study, as well as other studies conducted by Basmeh & Zeitouneh among refugee returnees in GoS-held Syria, clearly showcase that military conscription, and the consequences of having fled, deserted, or defected from it, pose a large protection risk and therefore deterrent to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Syrian males and their relatives. There is no solution in sight to address this, which translates into a continued need for protection for Syrian men, and their families, from the adverse effects of military conscription.

It is also important to recognize that military conscription did not suddenly become an issue during the war. The overarching system of conscription in Syria before the war paved the way for its current manifestation.

Hence, although the Syrian war has significantly changed the way Syrians consider their conscription, the problem that military conscription constitutes for Syrian men will not simply go away once the war ends.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, we would like to make the following recommendations:

With regard to protection from forced conscription and access to durable solutions

To the Governments of Syrian Refugee-hosting Countries

- Given the protection risks that military-age males and in particular draft evaders face when returning to Syria, the violations of and lack of trust in the 2018 military evaders' amnesty and the lack of the achievement of UNHCR protection Threshold 12 (see section 4.3.1), **Syrian military-age males should receive protection outside of Syria as long as these risks persist and as long as there are no genuine guarantees on the part of the GoS for the implementation of a comprehensive amnesty for draft avoiders and deserters, and other essential guarantees for the physical, legal and material safety of returnees. Therefore, the right to asylum for Syrian refugees, and respect for the principle of non-refoulement, should be upheld.**
- Given the improbability of a safe, sustainable, dignified, and voluntary return for Syrian military-age males in the short or medium term, refugee-hosting countries, international institutions, and donors need to ensure and apply a holistic approach that recognizes that the three internationally-recognized durable solutions for displaced Syrians are inherently interlinked and should be actively and simultaneously promoted. **Hence, EU member states should commit to improved responsibility-sharing and uphold the right to apply for asylum and increase the number of resettlement places, as well as other safe and legal routes for Syrian refugees to Europe.** Any asylum and resettlement procedures that have been halted due to COVID-19 should immediately be restarted.

To UNHCR

- In light of the lack of international and independent monitoring of the protection risks and living conditions of refugee and IDP returnees, and in particular the lack of data on and structural monitoring of the fulfillment of UNHCR protection Threshold 12 (pertaining to an amnesty for all those who evaded compulsory military service or reservist service and have deserted from the armed forces), **more resources should be allocated to establishing a monitoring system - on the basis of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds and with sufficient resources - that closely monitors the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Syrians;** and provide regular and publicly available reporting on the situation in Syria with regards to the thresholds, including on any backsliding or information gaps.

To the GoS

- An amnesty for military draft avoiders, either from the compulsory military service or reservist service, and deserters, should be implemented immediately.
- All conscripts should be discharged after the official service period of one-and-a-half years instead of serving indefinitely.

With regard to humanitarian programming and providing psychosocial support to those adversely affected by military conscription

To Humanitarian Practitioners, Donors, and NGOs

- Incorporate an understanding of how the **(adverse) effects of military conscription impact, also on the long term, the lives, psychosocial well-being and livelihood opportunities of Syrian men and their relatives, into humanitarian and protection programming.** Raise awareness and preparedness of humanitarian practitioners by strengthening their capacities to recognize these effects and address them. Ensure the inclusion of female family members in these programs.

With regard to further research around mandatory military conscription in Syria

- Given the significant and long-lasting psychological impact of military service on the lives of Syrian men, more resources should be dedicated to further assessing and understanding these, in order to provide the protection and the psychosocial and mental health support that people adversely impacted by it, require.
- This research mainly focused on the adverse effects of military conscription, given the impact these clearly have. However, investigating whether and why some individuals still voluntarily sign up to join the SAA, and more specifically, the extent to which women voluntarily enlist in the SAA and what their experiences are like, could shed an interesting light on pro-GoS dynamics.

More research needs to be done on the gendered consequences of mandatory conscription, some of which were touched upon in this report, but many of which were outside the scope of the research. For instance, conducting longitudinal research regarding the increased gender imbalance in different communities in Syria as a result of the war could shed interesting light on the longer-term consequences of the conflict of Syria's gender roles and social fabric.

- Map or further gauge the way conscription or evader status influences Syrians' access to durable solutions. Even though displacement is usually caused or prolonged by a multitude of factors, the role of military conscription is evidently a large factor that is useful for several purposes to isolate as a variable.



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