

4.2.1. Military service: overview

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this document has been reviewed and updated. Please consult '[Interim Country Guidance: Syria \(2025\)](#)'

COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: April 2024

Male citizens between the age of 18 and 42 are obliged by law to perform their military service for a duration of between 18 and 21 months, depending on their level of education. Career soldiers can be called to service up to the age bracket of 48 to 62, depending on the rank. Registered Palestinians residing in Syria are also subject to conscription and usually serve in the ranks of the SAA-affiliated Palestinian Liberation Army. After completing compulsory military service, former soldiers can be called up for reserve service until 42 years of age [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.1, p.22; [Targeting 2022](#), 2.1, p. 37; [Military service](#), 2, p. 13]. The age limit is less dependent on the universal draft than on the government's mobilising efforts and local developments [[Military service](#), 2.1, p. 13]. Sources have reported in previous years on cases where men past the age of 42 were conscripted or called up for reserve service. A source interviewed in July 2023 stated that they were not aware of conscripts serving in the SAA past the age of 42 but knew numerous cases of persons over 42 serving in SAA-affiliated militias [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.1, p.22].

Recruitment of conscripts and reservists

All Syrian men must report for military service and get their military booklet at a local recruitment division office after turning 18. Syrians living abroad have to report to a Syrian embassy or consulate to fill in a specific form which would serve as a substitute for the military booklet until their return to Syria. Military exemptions and deferrals are recorded in the military booklet. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 23]

Failure to report to the military recruitment division within the period specified results in a fine and a potential extension of additional months of the military service period. Those who do not report within one year of becoming eligible for military service or do not start their military service, are registered in a national database as draft evaders. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 23].

The SAA is also recruiting conscripts through reconciliation agreements/settlement of status which are announced periodically. These conscripts are either incorporated directly in the SAA or in affiliated militias [For more information on these agreements see below the section [Regional specifics](#)].

According to one source, new conscripts will get a maximum of 45 days training and are then considered ready for deployment, while another source stated that training of conscripts lasts six months. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 24]

In practice, an alternative to the military service in the SAA is joining a SAA-affiliated militia. Those who join militias reportedly do so for better salaries and incentives, such as being promised that they would be serving in their area of origin and be exempted from military service. However, according to a source, when the SAA is involved in active fighting and has a need for manpower, militias would also be deployed to the frontlines to take part in the confrontations as auxiliary forces to the SAA. Moreover, once their service in the militias is completed, individuals still risk being conscripted by the SAA under the pretext that they had avoided mandatory military service. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 25]

Reservists continue to be called up for service, albeit in smaller numbers compared to previous years due to the reduction of armed confrontations. Individuals with specific skills such as tank crewmen are more likely to be called up for reserve service. It has also been reported that reservists from former opposition-held areas are increasingly called up for service, as the GoS wants to assert more control over these areas. If those who are called up for reserve service do not report within the given deadline, their name will be added to wanted lists and they would risk being arrested by the authorities. Between August 2022 and August 2023, sources reported that GoS security forces arrested men wanted for reserve service, including in Rural Damascus and Idlib governorates. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 25-26]

Conscientious objection

According to Article 46 of the Syrian Constitution of 2012, ‘compulsory military service shall be a sacred duty’ and ‘defending the territorial integrity of the homeland and maintaining the secrets of the state shall be a duty of every citizen’. The right to conscientious objection is not legally recognised and there are no provisions for substitute or alternative service. Only Christian and Muslim religious leaders continued to be exempted from the military based on conscientious objection, although Muslim religious leaders were required to pay an exemption fee. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p.29; [Targeting 2022](#), 2.2, p. 14]

Exemptions and deferrals

The law permits exemptions from military service for the categories of individuals described below. Generally, the exemptions from military service are being enforced in practice by the GoS. However, sources noted that, at times, the GoS resorts to blackmail and extortion of individuals seeking to obtain or renew exemptions. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 29; [Military service](#), 3, p. 28]

- **Only sons:** a family’s only son can be granted deferral from military service for one or more years, which he must renew until he is granted a permanent exemption, i.e. until his mother reaches an age when she is not expected to be able to give birth to another child. In October 2021, there were increasing reports of the conscription of men who were the only sons in a family [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.6, p. 44; [Military service](#), 3.1, p. 28].
- **Medical cases:** military service exemptions are granted for medical reasons related to a person’s inability to handle military duties (such as heart conditions and visual impairments). Such illnesses may exempt the person from military service or assign him to ‘non-combatant roles’, such as administrative positions that do not require physical exertion that would conflict with their health condition. A person wishing to make use of this exemption has to undergo a medical examination which would need to determine that he has a medical issue that would make him only eligible for administrative tasks. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, pp. 29-30]. Obtaining an exemption from military service for medical reasons or being assigned to non-combatant roles has been increasingly difficult, and issues of bribery and extortion are common [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 30]. In January and February 2022, sources noted that it was common for medical exemptions to be ignored and for the

person to be required to serve in the military anyway [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.6, p. 44]. In some cases, if authorities discovered that the medical exemption was wrongfully granted (e.g. via paying a bribe) they would require the person to undergo another medical examination. Residents ‘determined to serve in a non-field service’ in the military because of their specific health conditions can pay a fee of USD 3 000 to be exempted from military service [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 30].

- **Students:** students can defer their conscription on a yearly basis while they are studying [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 30]. Restrictions apply on the age limits allowed to start different levels of education, as well as on the number of study years during which students are permitted to request exemption from military service. As of October 2021, exemptions for students had become increasingly difficult to claim, and students had been drafted on a case-by-case basis [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.6, p. 45; [Military service](#), 3.3, p. 29]. The GoS issued a decision prohibiting students from repeating their final year of college more than three times, as it was discovered that some students deliberately failed in the last year of college in order to delay their enlistment in the military. A student in such a situation would not be granted exemption from military service and would risk conscription. In August 2022, the GoS issued a decree whereby students and graduates of medical and health schools who committed themselves to serve in public institutions for a 10-year period were exempted from military service. A source attributed the decision to the significant shortage of medical personnel in Syria. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 31]
- **Paying an exemption fee:** the law also allows for the payment of an exemption fee; however, this only applies for people residing abroad. The amount of the exemption fee is between 7?000 to 10?000 USD and depends on the length of stay abroad [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 31; [Targeting 2022](#), 2.1, p. 37]. It was reported that many conscripts residing abroad had made use of the option of paying an exemption fee, but the rules change regularly [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.6, p. 45; [Military service](#), 3.4, p. 31]. Exemption from reserve service is also acquirable by Syrians who have been residing abroad for at least one year upon payment of a fee of USD 5 000 [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 30]. The exemption fee can be paid either from abroad at a Syrian embassy or consulate, or by a proxy (for instance a family member) in Syria. In both cases, the exemption will have to be registered in the military booklet of the person by approaching the military recruitment division either through the proxy or in person upon return to Syria, in the case of persons paying the exemption fee themselves from abroad. While several sources stated that the GoS does not forcibly conscript persons who paid the exemption fee, some returnees have reportedly expressed concerns that either them, friends or relatives were at risk of forced conscription in the SAA despite the fact that in some cases they had served in the SAA prior to the current conflict or paid the exemption fee. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, pp. 30-31]
- **Service in the internal security services, including police:** according to the Conscription law, a person is exempted from military service if he has completed at least 10 years of service in the internal security services, including in the police. This period was reduced to five years by Legislative Decree No. 1 of 2012. Those who do not serve the full five years are still required to complete their military service. However, anyone who is accepted into the police signs a 10-year contract [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.5, p. 29].

Amnesties

The GoS regularly announces amnesties which cover offences of army desertion or evasion from military service. According to a source, amnesties do not cover those who evaded reserve service. Most amnesties are partial and selective in nature and several ‘end up excluding the release of detainees who were arrested for

their role in the uprising or for their political position’ [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.6, p. 32; [Targeting 2022](#), 2.5, p. 42]. The amnesties’ implementation often takes place ‘with a considerable level of corruption and extortion’. Other sources also mentioned that there was distrust among the population, because the GoS has repeatedly shown its unreliability by not respecting prior amnesties and reconciliation agreements, e.g. by arresting and detaining Syrians or by sending them directly to military service. [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.5, p. 43]

Individuals who want to make use of the amnesties must also generally undergo a reconciliation/settlement process. Those who benefit from the amnesties are still required to perform compulsory military service. Following amnesty decrees issued in 2022, the release of some individuals from detention centres under the control of the GoS and their conscription into mandatory military service was documented, as well as cases of individuals who presented themselves to recruitment centres and were enlisted into mandatory military service. According to sources, amnesties issued by GoS do not exonerate defectors but rather criminalise them because of ‘their dealings with external entities’. Defectors are still subject to prosecution, investigation, and compulsory residence for those who are older and who have bad health conditions [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.6, p. 32-33].

Discharge

According to Law No. 35/2011, military service lasts between 18 and 21 months. However, since the outbreak of the conflict, reservists and military personnel have reportedly served for an indefinite period of time. A source from March 2022 pointed out that people with special military skills served longer, while those in socially demanded professions, such as doctors, were more likely to be demobilised at the end of the official duration of military service [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.3, p. 41]. Between August 2022 and August 2023, three administrative orders were issued to discharge certain groups of conscripts and reservists who had already served a certain number of years [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.6, p. 28-29].

Regional specifics

In the recaptured territories, men of military age must also perform compulsory military service and the SAA is reportedly recruiting conscripts through ‘reconciliation’ agreements which are announced periodically. These conscripts are either incorporated directly in the SAA or in affiliated militias. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 24]

Although reconciliation agreements usually gave them a six-month grace period once they had clarified their situation with the security forces (‘taswiyat al-wada’), reports have documented the arrest, detention and forced conscription of individuals before this grace period expired. [[Military service](#), 2.3.1, p. 16]

In June 2023, the GoS initiated a settlement in Dar’a governorate for draft evaders, for those wanted for reserve service and for military defectors. All those who underwent the settlement had the possibility to obtain official travel documentation and travel outside the country. Sources noted that, in this way, the GoS was incentivising young men from Dar’a to leave the country while also gathering information on opposition members and extorting money from those who underwent the process. While the GoS announced that around 15 000 men underwent the settlement by mid-June, other sources reported that over 50 % of those wanted in Dar’a boycotted the settlement. Reportedly, military defectors particularly expressed distrust of the settlement. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 24]

In Sweida governorate, the local Druze population has largely resisted compulsory and reserve conscription in the SAA throughout the conflict [[Military service](#), 2.3.2, p. 17]. The number of draft evaders in the governorate was, according to several sources, estimated at around 30?000. In October 2022, the GoS also initiated a ‘security settlement’ in the governorate for persons wanted for compulsory and reserve service. Sources reported that only between 1?000 and 2?500 out of 30?000 men wanted for compulsory and reserve

service had undergone the security settlement [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.2, p. 24-25].

The GoS has reportedly not been able to recruit conscripts in SDF-controlled areas. Some sources reported that forced recruitment to the SAA is being carried out in GoS-controlled security areas located in Hasaka and Qamishli cities, while others contrarily did not expect that persons entering these security areas would be conscripted. [[Targeting 2022](#), 2.3, p. 40]. Moreover, it was reported that from its controlled areas in Hasaka and Qamishli cities, the GoS was also trying to recruit conscripts from areas outside its control [[COI Update 2023](#), 3, p. 12].

Deployment

Military operations and the GoS' need of manpower are reportedly the main factors influencing the deployment of conscripts and reservists. According to different sources, conscripts and reservists cannot choose their place of deployment. Conscripts may, allegedly, be able to pay a bribe to the commander of the division to be assigned to a specific division or avoid specific duties. Bribing an officer to serve in a non-field position or not to serve at all is, according to sources, also a common practice. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.3, p. 26]

The GoS reportedly tends to deploy its forces in areas that pose the greatest threat to its control, for instance in northwestern Syria (Idlib and northern Aleppo). It has been reported that conscripts may be assigned to do their military service in units that have been involved in human rights violations, including war crimes, throughout the conflict, such as the Special Forces, the Republican Guard, the Fourth Armoured Division, the Air Force Intelligence or the Military Intelligence. According to the same source, the conscripts do not have the possibility to choose the unit in which they are to serve. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.3, p. 26]

While some of the main elite divisions of the SAA, such as the Fourth Armoured Division, have recruited mostly Alawites into their ranks, sources in 2023 have reported that recent recruitment practices of that group have also targeted Sunni conscripts and former opposition fighters, particularly in Dar'a governorate, as well as draft evaders and deserters in Homs governorate. According to a source, conscripts from former opposition areas would not be selected to serve in sensitive positions such as in intelligence agencies where conscripts who are viewed as loyal to the GoS would be preferred [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.3, p. 27; [Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 24-25].

According to another source, conscripts may be sent to the frontlines irrespective of their fighting experience or military skills. Conscripts originating from former opposition-held areas reportedly would be disproportionately sent to the frontlines despite receiving minimal training, as punishment for their perceived lack of loyalty to the GoS. A source noted that most of the casualties suffered by the SAA on active frontlines (such as Idlib in early 2020) were conscripts who originated from former opposition-held areas (such as Dar'a, Darraya, Douma) and had little fighting experience [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.2.3, p. 27]. Several sources indicated that reservists are also deployed to the frontlines, although in smaller numbers [[Military service](#), 2.5.1, p. 24, 2.5.2, p. 25]

Conduct of the Syrian army

The implication of the regime and the associated armed groups in acts which fall under the exclusion provision of [Article 12\(2\)\(a\) QD](#) and [Article 17\(1\)\(a\) QD](#) has been noted repeatedly by the UN and others. Throughout the conflict, government forces and associated armed groups have used a wide range of tactics to force opposition-held areas into surrendering, including sieges, blocking of humanitarian aid, denial of access to food and other basic services, and targeted attacks on medical facilities, schools and local markets. GoS attacks on opposition-held areas have been largely disproportionate, including attacks against protected objects and residential areas. The GoS not only used cluster bombs, which have an indiscriminate effect, but also weapons that have been banned internationally, such as some chemical and incendiary weapons. The

Assad regime has been reported to deliberately and repeatedly target civilians in Syria with both conventional and chemical weapons. As of early 2019, reports ranged from 32 to about 330 chemical attacks attributed to the Syrian government. [[Security 2020](#), 1.6.1.4, p. 15, Annex II, pp. 244-245; [Actors](#), 2.4, p. 38]

Violence, including rape of women, girls and occasionally men, committed by government forces and associated militias during ground operations, raids and in detention, was also reported [[Actors](#), 2.4, p. 38].

According to recent reports, the GoS forces continued to employ ground-based and aerial attacks on populated areas resulting in civilian casualties. They were further responsible for extrajudicial killings and deaths in detention centres due to torture and medical negligence [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 26]. (Pro-)GoS forces targeted civilians in hospitals, residential areas, schools, and IDP settlements throughout 2022. These forces reportedly employed the ‘deliberate killing of civilians, as well as their forced displacement, rape, and starvation, and protracted siege-like conditions that occasionally forced local surrenders’ as military tactics. Between August 2022 and August 2023, siege-like conditions imposed by the GoS were reported in Al-Rukban IDP camp, which shelters between 7 500 and 10?000 IDPs in eastern Homs governorate, and in the SDF-controlled neighbourhoods of Al-Ashrafiya and Al-Sheikh Maqsoud in Aleppo city, as well as in the Al-Shahba area, which includes the Tall Rifaat region in northern Aleppo [[Security 2023](#), 1.5.1, p. 35-36].

There were fewer attacks on medical and emergency rescue personnel and facilities in 2020 and 2021 respectively compared to previous years. A decrease in GoS attacks on such targets in areas controlled by other conflict parties has also been observed in 2022. However, the deliberate targeting of medical facilities and medical personnel by GoS forces continued through attacks and shelling. The GoS also continued to arrest, detain, or forcibly disappear medical personnel in their own areas [[Security 2023](#), 1.5.1, p. 36, 1.5.4, p. 43; [Targeting 2022](#), 8.1, pp. 80-82]

For further guidance on the qualification of the acts of the GoS forces as excludable in relation to Article 12(2) and Article 17(1) QD, see [8.?Exclusion](#)

See other topics concerning persons who evaded or deserted military service:

- [4.2.1. Military service: overview](#)
- [4.2.2. Draft evaders](#)
- [4.2.3. Military deserters and defectors](#)

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