

3.2. The Government of Syria and associated armed groups

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

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The Syrian State actors include members of security forces and other authorities, such as local councils or other local officials, e.g. *mukhtars*. It should also be noted that the distinction between official State forces and non-State forces is not always clear.

The **Syrian Armed Forces** consist of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the Naval Forces, the Air Forces, Air Defence Forces and the National Defence Forces (NDF). Alawites hold the most important positions in the SAA, and elite divisions, such as the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division, were reportedly mostly Alawite. SAA leaders allegedly lack control over their divisions. Army divisions are said to be controlled by the government's intelligence services and to be under the authority of Iranian and Russian influence. The army can no longer be considered a cohesive force, but rather a coalition of regular forces and allied militias [[Security 2022](#), 1.4.1, p. 26]. The Fourth Division established and backed by Russia has reportedly amassed power and influence, expanding its military, economic and criminal activities. The military core of this division is deployed throughout the country but mainly present near the capital and its western and southwestern peripheries. [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 26].

Intelligence services are operating in Syria. The services operate outside the law with no defined boundaries between their areas of jurisdiction and with overlapping responsibilities. Several laws empower the security apparatus and allow its members to act with impunity [[Actors](#), 2.3.2, p. 31]. The **police force** report to the Ministry of Interior, but they can receive orders from branches of the intelligence agencies. There have also been frequent instances where police acted as informers on anti-government activity and political dissidence in support of the services [[Actors](#), 2.3.3, p. 32].

A number of **pro-government militias** are operating alongside the regular armed forces. There are local militias, such as the NDF, and non-Syrian militias made up of foreign fighters, mainly backed by Iran [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 24-25; [Actors](#), 2.3.4, p. 34]. By 2012, the GoS consolidated militias under its control and incorporated them under an umbrella network set up with Iran's assistance, the **NDF**. The NDF were reported to be 'quite inclusive of all the groups that are willing to fight on the side of Syrian government', including Sunnis from Damascus and Aleppo, 'mercenaries, crime lords, and unemployed citizens'. They have become auxiliary security institutions, which operate their own prisons and investigation commissions [[Actors](#), 2.3.4, p. 34]. Other examples of Syrian pro-government militias include the **Tiger Forces**¹, serving as the army of the Air Forces Intelligence, militias of wealthy and powerful Alawite businessmen with close links to the Assad government, such as the **al-Bustan militias** and **Suquor al Sahara** [[Actors](#), 2.3.4, p. 35].

Apart from Syrian pro-GoS militias, **Shia foreign fighters** were mobilised by Iran and sent to fight on the side of the Assad government. The most prominent groups included the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade, as well as various Iraqi Shia militias that are members of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces, and fighters from Yemen [[Actors](#), 2.3.4, p. 34].

Palestinian militias such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command, the SAA-affiliated Palestinian Liberation Army and the Al-Quds Brigade (Liwa Al-Quds) also supported the government military in the conflict [[Actors](#), 2.3.4, p. 36]. The latter group has come to dominate the Palestinian camps in Aleppo, Latakia, Hama and Homs as a political and military force [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 25].

As of December 2022, the GoS controlled about two thirds of the country, including central and southern Syria, the governorates along the Mediterranean coast, and parts of eastern Syria and Aleppo. The GoS also controlled Syria's most important cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, or Hama [[Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 25; [Security 2022](#), 1.5.1, p. 41].

Syrian State actors including associated armed groups have committed a wide range of human rights violations since the beginning of the conflict. Recent sources indicated that GoS forces continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain people, with detention leading to torture, ill-treatment, and in some instances to death of detainees. Besides arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, the GoS was reported to use torture and sexual violence as a method of control, intimidation and extortion, harassment and other violations [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.1, p. 12; [Security 2023](#), 1.4.1, p. 26, [Targeting 2022](#), 1.1.2, p. 20].



For further information on human rights violations committed by the GoS and associated armed groups and their relevance as potential exclusion grounds, see [8. Exclusion](#).

See other topics concerning actors of persecution or serious harm:

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¹ The Tiger Forces were renamed to 25th Special Tasks Division in 2019. See [Security 2023](#), 1.4.1., footnote 96.