

Review of the UK Home Office Country Information and Guidance on Syria; Security and humanitarian situation, Dec. 2014

Prepared for the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration & the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Instructions

- 1.1.1 As per the instructions, this Review is completed in accordance with the terms of reference provided, which are:
- (i) Assessing the extent to which information from source documents has been appropriately and accurately reflected in the Country Information and Guidance (CIG) Report
 - (ii) Identifying additional sources detailing the current human rights situation in the country with respect to the main asylum claims (which are noted in each CIG Report)
 - (iii) Noting and correcting any specific errors or omissions of fact
 - (iv) Making recommendations for general improvements regarding, for example, the structure of the report, its coverage or its overall approach
- 1.1.2 Further, no part of this review will pass judgment on the policy guidance provided; to be clear an absence of commentary on policy guidance should not be interpreted as acquiescence or opposition with the policy advice provided.

1.2 Methodology

- 1.2.1 The Review is based upon an analysis of all the sources of information cited in the *Country Information and Guidance (CIG) for Syria; Security and humanitarian situation, Dec. 2014* produced by the Home Office (UK Border Agency). It also examines responses to 10 individual Country of Information Requests (IRs). This comprised, *inter alia*, a cross check of each excerpt included in the CIG Report and IRs against the original source of information, and a comparison of the excerpts included in the CIG report and IRs to other publicly available sources. This analysis was based on the established best practice criteria for COI research: accuracy, range and reliability of sources, relevance of the information, currency and transparency.
- 1.2.2 The scope of the review also includes a more general assessment of the report's coherence and format, commenting on methods used in its compilation, and offering suggestions on how its structure and/or organisation might be improved to deliver the content more effectively in the context of the report's goals.
- 1.2.3 The CIG for Syria is up-to-date as of 16 December 2014; therefore the review will be limited to information available before that date.
- 1.2.4 This Review has been written by the author in her capacity as an independent consultant, no views are to be imputed to any other person or organisation, including and especially the United Nations.

1.3 Summary of findings on the CIG report

In carrying out this review, I am aware of the considerable difficulties involved in accurately capturing the reality on the ground in Syria, given the complex political dynamics of the country and the fact that access to that reality is heavily constrained by, amongst other

things, the adverse security environment. The country information is complex with limited reliable sources. Many of the usual providers of information were expelled from the territory of Syria during the period under review and hence the information that has been provided must be taken with this constraint in mind. Despite these constraints the information provided in the CIG for Syria generally provides a good overview of the situation in Syria.

There are however, tendencies in the report, to omit footnotes when reproducing text, and to leave in old evidence/information. Although, to external parties it may seem as if the situation inside Syria does not change, after more than four years of crisis there is still a civil war, the situation on the ground changes rapidly. It is important that the CIG is kept up to date and references to old material removed, unless the purpose of the old material is to provide an historical account.

Finally, when assessing source reliability, it is important to consider source accessibility to the territory of Syria, whether the sources are first, second or third-hand and any potential bias the author of the source may have before including a source in the report.

2 Quality and balance of sources

2.1 Citing original/primary sources

“Although it is not always possible to find the original source that documented the fact, event or situation for the first time... This will help to avoid *round tripping, false corroboration* and misquoting of information”¹

On four occasions text was quoted without quoting the relevant footnoted material that appeared in the original text. This prevents the reader from knowing the true source of the information. For the sake of transparency and to avoid round tripping and false corroboration, as mentioned above, here suggestions relating to three of the four examples:

Paragraph no.	Problem/Issue	Suggested Amendment
Citing Original/ Primary Sources		
2.3.5	Charles Lister at Brookings provides the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011 (fn) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (fn 27) as sources for his observations. This was not present in the CIG.	The Military Balance publication produced by the International Institute for Strategic Studies is not open source so there is no way to check this reference. However, it is suggested that the report make it clear that this is where the information came from. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has been widely discredited (see 2.3.9 of this Review). It is suggested that all material coming from this source that has not been corroborated be removed.

¹ European Union, Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI),

2.3.11	Charles Lister provides the source for quantity of NDF personnel as the wall street journal (fn 29) and his information about Hezbollah as coming from an interview with Philip Smyth (fn 30).	It is suggested that either the original sources missing from the text of the CIG be cited or this material be removed. The reason for the proposal to remove is two-fold: Firstly, this is not the Best Evidence, Charles Lister's speciality is on opposition groups and not on Government forces/ supporters of the Syrian Government. It is not plausible that he would have credible conflicts from both sides of this conflict. For further information see 2.3.9 of this Review). Secondly, it is hard to see which part of the Home Office Policy this COI supports.
2.3.14	A paragraph from the Congressional Research Service has been quoted without specifying the primary resources they used and mentioned in their footnotes.	The actual text refers to a video by the Christian Science Monitor, two references from the CTC (Combatting Terrorism Centre) Sentinel and a reference to the New York Times. It is recommended that the text in the CIG is transparent about the use of these sources.

The fourth occasion relates to information on Chemical Weapons and therefore is dealt with at paragraph 3.3.1 below.

2.2 Selective Quoting

On one occasion there appeared to be an example of selective quoting. Example, with suggestion is below:

Paragraph no.	Problem/Issue	Suggested Amendment
Selective Quoting		

2.3.3	<p>The August 2014 Report from the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has been cited but without a key section in the middle. The part before and after the bit that has been left out speaks of military losses while the bit that has been left out speaks of military gains: "14. Military successes in Dara'a and Idlib governorates underscored some armed groups' ability to prevent the Government from regaining full control over the territory. In most of those victories, armed groups labelled as moderate continued to operate under ad hoc operation rooms, closely coordinating with extremist groups, including Al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra."</p>	<p>Add the paragraph that has been left out to the CIG so as to give a complete picture.</p>
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2.3 Using the Best Evidence

2.3.1 In many ways, developments in technology have contributed to the perception that more and more information is available about crises as they occur. However, quality is often sacrificed. The situation in Syria has been so much in the public eye that there has been no end to alleged 'experts' and reports on Syria; much of this information is inconsistent. This review of reliability of the types of evidence used is intended to assist the Home Office in finding the most reliable source of information for any given fact.

2.3.2 The Media: Journalists would, above all describe the importance of working in the field and how hard that was made for them in Syria. In 2014 the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) described Syria as the most dangerous place for journalists in the world.² In March 2014, the CPJ reported that at least 65 journalists had been killed, more than 80 abducted and approximately 30 missing in the three years since the Syrian crisis began. Four months earlier, in November 2014, earlier Reporters without Borders reported that more than 110 news providers had been killed in the course of their work on Syria.³ The same report states:

“The government uses the state media in a propaganda and disinformation war. At the same time, new media often turn into puppets of the “revolution” and end up trying to impose a new form of thought control. Foreign Journalists, who are often denied visas, rarely have access to both sides. But the presence of these neutral and independent observers on both sides of the front line is essential for deciphering a complex situation and explaining the realities of this war to the international community.”⁴

² <https://cpj.org/2014/03/syria-the-most-dangerous-place-for-journalists.php>

³ <http://en.rsf.org/syrie-journalism-in-syria-impossible-job-06-11-2013,45424.html>

⁴ see Journalism in Syria, impossible job ? by Reporters Without Borders, November 2013: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/182004073/Journalism-in-Syria-impossible-job>

However, even when foreign journalists did gain access with permission from the government they were much more heavily supervised than any other person in country.⁵ This is by no means abnormal in conflict situations.⁶ Nevertheless, the pace of reporting on Syria and limitations on access led some professionals in the media to cut corners.⁷ Given these constraints, it is more necessary than ever that multiple sources be used when making a point.

- 2.3.3 **Humanitarian Organisations:** Throughout the crisis in Syria, and in particular in 2014, United Nations Humanitarian Agencies and other international and national NGOs worked inside Syria providing assistance in the areas of Food and Agriculture, Health, Shelter and Non-food items, Water and Sanitation, Nutrition, Education and Protection. The names of these different UN agencies and INGOs and NGOs working inside Syria on these areas are provided in the Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan (SHARP).⁸ Given the presence of these organisations inside Syria, the ‘best evidence’ of the humanitarian situation must come from them. Every year, the SHARP, a document that is used to ask for funding for humanitarian assistance inside Syria provides the latest information on the humanitarian situation. Individual organisations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), provide information on areas within their capacity such as Protection and Shelter. To this end, the CIG made excellent use of the UNHABITAT governorate profiles, commentary by Erin Mooney for Forced Migration Review (a former UNHCR staff member inside Syria).
- 2.3.4 SHARP actors aside, other UN officials entered Syria throughout the crisis with mandates in Human Rights such as the Special Representative to the Secretary General on Children in Conflict, the Special Representative to the Secretary General on Sexual Violence and Conflict and the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons have all been on mission inside Syria. Whilst entering the territory of Syria on a brief mission is unlikely to enable one to monitor human rights atrocities or gain a full perspective of the situation, it does bring these organisations closer to the truth and the standard of the evidence provided should be considered with these things in mind.
- 2.3.5 Of note, there has been a divergence in information coming from humanitarians working in/on Syria, a fact pointed out by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (and referenced in the CIG at paragraph 2.5.4). Differences arose from a difference in perspective between organisations working inside Syria from Damascus with the permission of the Government and organisations providing assistance to individuals inside Syria from (largely Turkey) without government permission. These discrepancies should now be resolved, as following Security Council Resolution 2165, humanitarian organisations decided to adopt a ‘Whole of Syria’ approach, thus providing now the same/similar information to the outside world. The Home Office has done exceptionally well to use excerpts from both sides of the

⁵ Ibid. at 14

⁶ <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2014-11-11/bbc-middle-east-editor-jeremy-bowen-explains-why-the-war-in-syria-keeps-pulling-him-back>

⁷ Some examples include: The Syria Gay Girl in Damascus Blog (an American man studying in Scotland): <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13744980>; Pictures of the Iraqi massacre published whilst announcing the massacre in Al Houla: <http://www.infowars.com/bbc-caught-in-syria-massacre-propaganda-hoax/>; A Fake video; <http://journal-neo.org/2014/11/27/what-the-fake-syria-sniper-boy-video-tell-us-about-media-experts/>

⁸ <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2014-syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-assistance-response-plan-sharp>

humanitarian spectrum during this period of inner turmoil. The reports provided by IDMC and The Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP) provides useful balance on the issue.

2.3.6 The United Nations: The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Commission of Inquiry) who has never entered the Syrian Arab Republic throughout its mandate systematically highlights this as a ‘challenge’:

“2. The commission’s investigations remain curtailed by the denial of access to the Syrian Arab Republic”⁹.

Further, under the methodology the Commission of Inquiry has made clear that it has relied on “first-hand accounts” and that “[t]he standard of proof is met when the commission has reasonable ground to believe that the incidents occurred as described”.¹⁰ Given the number of interviews the Commission of Inquiry has completed (480 for the August 2014 Report alone¹¹). The Commission of Inquiry report, whilst not always the best evidence of human rights violations, is extremely good evidence and often the only evidence systematically available.

2.3.7 The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women also provides good evidence as the Committee actively engages with representatives of the government of Syria in the report cited. There are admissions on all sides of work to be done.

2.3.8 Certain Governments: Often, information provided by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and/the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) can be extremely insightful as these governments will usually have people on the ground who have witnessed or been able to corroborate first hand accounts. However, on this occasion, since June 2012, most Western Diplomats were declared *persona non grata*.¹² Whilst both countries have presence in neighbouring countries and may receive intelligence that other sources are not privy to, this has not been shared publically; the standard of the reports provided by the CRS and FCO appear to rely heavily on documents already in the public domain. It is therefore suggested that where possible, the Home Office CIG checks and cites the original sources directly.

2.3.9 Other: The Brookings Institute article cited¹³ is written by Charles Lister who himself claims on his LinkedIn account that “his work has been nearly exclusively focused on assessing the status of the conflict in Syria, especially the makeup of the anti-government insurgency and its various jihadi components. This has included a significant program of face-to-face engagement with the leadership of over 100 armed opposition groups from

⁹ paragraph 2, United Nations General Assembly, Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Human Rights Council, 27th session, 13 August 2014, A/HRC/27/60

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid* at Summary.

¹² See <http://www.rappler.com/world/6507-syria-declares-western-diplomats-persona-non-grata>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/05/us-syria-crisis-diplomats-idUSBRE8540HC20120605>; <http://www.dp-news.com/en/detail.aspx?articleid=122471>

¹³ Brookings Institute (Charles Lister), Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape, 19 May 2014

<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/19%20syria%20military%20landscape%20lister/syria%20military%20landscape%20english.pdf>

across the entire Syrian Spectrum”. It therefore seems that Charles Lister’s expertise revolves primarily around opposition groups. Information on the Syrian government is outside the scope of his expertise and as such Charles Lister usually provides footnotes of other sources or explains his working out. In summary, while Charles Lister has extremely good evidence on opposition groups, he would not be the best source to cite when measuring elements of government capacity or control. On that basis, it is recommended that the information quoted from Brookings in paragraph 2.3.1 is removed. Further, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), whilst not cited directly in the CIG, is one of the sources used by Charles Lister, when commenting on Syrian Government related activity. This organisation has since been widely discredited as a one-man show being run out of Coventry by a man who has not set foot into Syria many years before the crisis began.¹⁴

2.3.10 No review can be made of the references to Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, as it is a subscription source not publically available.

2.4 Using the Latest Evidence

On three occasions the information provided was out-dated; here are the examples and suggestions:

¹⁴ See <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/12/syrian-opposition-doing-the-talking>, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/12/08/uk-britain-syria-idUKTRE7B71XG20111208>, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/us-arms-syria-rebels-750/> , <http://worldnews.rubben.be/2015/10/11592/mainstream-media-continue-to-rely-on-syrian-observatory-for-human-rights-run-by-a-guy-who-left-syria-15-years-ago/>

Paragraph no.	Problem/Issue	Suggested Amendment
The latest Information		
1.3.7	<p>The CIG states that “UNHCR identifies among its risk profiles “Real or perceived supporters of the Syrian Government, including for example Government officials; civilians of urban neighbourhoods, towns or villages (perceived to be) supporting the Government family members of (perceived) Government supporters” and “Persons (perceived to be) opposing armed opposition groups and Kurdish armed groups in areas under the de facto control of such armed groups”. This text is provided without citation but is however a direct quote from UNHCR’s second update on International Protection considerations. However, since that time and before this report was published UNHCR superseded its advice.</p>	<p>It is suggested that the above quote is replaced with the following to be found in page 15 of Update III: “Persons supporting or perceived to be supporting the government, including, but not limited to, government officials and members of government-affiliated parties members and perceived members of government and pro-government forces and civilians perceived to be collaborating with government or pro-government forces; family members of persons supporting or perceived to be supporting the government; and civilian inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods, towns and villages perceived to be supporting the government”</p>
2.4.4	<p>This paragraph refers to the UNHCR Protection considerations as published in October 2013. As noted elsewhere in the CIG, these guidelines had since been updated. The information provided that “frontlines are reported to be heavily static overall” was out of date at the time of the report. The latest guidelines at the time of the CIG report indicate, “frontlines keep shifting and formerly safer areas become embroiled in conflict”</p>	<p>Update the information with the text found in the UNHCR: International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update III, October 2014 at paragraph 5.</p>
2.4.5	<p>This paragraph references the Commission of Inquiry report submitted in February 2014. The two paragraphs quoted represent material that is no longer pertinent in December 2014, when the CIG was updated as it refers to a time when ceasefires were being brokered prior to the Geneva II conference. More up to date information can be found in conclusion section of the subsequent Commission of Inquiry report submitted in August 2014 and referenced elsewhere in the CIG.</p>	<p>It is recommended that paragraph 2.4.5. be removed, and if necessary replaced.</p>

3 Subject Specific Review

3.1 The Protagonists - Structure

3.1 Paragraphs 2.3.13 and 2.3.14 refer to the Iraqi Shia group Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), then it moves to the Suqur al Sahara (Desert Falcons) at paragraph 2.3.15 and then reverts back to Liwa Abu al Fadhal al Abbas (LAFA) at paragraph 2.3.16. It is suggested the two separated sections on LAFA are merged.

3.2 Humanitarian Situation

Facts and Figures

Paragraphs 1.3.15, 2.4.1, 2.5.1, 2.5.2, 2.5.3 and 2.5.5 all provide a different version of the statistics; the statistics being the number of people displaced, in need, reached, besieged etc. This is because some sources are older than others or are simply inconsistent. It is recommended that the CIG provide one set of figures and refrain from quotes that are inconsistent with the one chosen.

Within the context of Syria, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) publishes the official figures that all of the United Nations is supposed to use. It is on the basis of the figures calculated by OCHA that appeals to governments for funding or raising awareness on the humanitarian situation is made. However, as OCHA is the organisation responsible for the coordination of humanitarian assistance inside Syria as well as information management the most reliable figures available must come from them. It is therefore advised that statements made by Valerie Amos, the Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, statements made in documents requesting funding (such as the yearly Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan) and statements made by OCHA themselves are taken as the most authoritative on the humanitarian figures. The situation in Syria changes rapidly so these figures should be double checked at the time of drafting.

Additional Sources

Another key source of information on where the people most in need of assistance are located, including how many live in hard-to-reach areas and besieged areas is the report that the Secretary General provides to the Security Council on the implementation of resolutions 2139 and 2165¹⁵. These resolutions are on the ability of the humanitarian community to access those in need. Information for this report is collated on a monthly basis from most humanitarian organisations (United Nations and Non-Governmental Organisations) working inside Syria.

3.3 Nature and level of violence

3.3.1 Additional Sources on the Human Rights Situation

The Home Office has done well to reference the Commission of Inquiry reports for information about the Human Rights situation. Further reliable information can be derived from Human Rights Watch reports who have visited both government and non-government areas on short missions throughout the conflict. Further UNHCR Syria has a monthly

¹⁵ See, *inter alia*, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/840

Bulletin entitled Echoes from Syria that may shed some light on the treatment of the displaced in Syria.¹⁶

Children in Armed Conflict: Reports coming from the UN Special Representative to the Secretary General on children and armed conflict (henceforth SRSG on children and armed conflict) were surprisingly missing from this analysis. The SRSG on Children and Armed Conflict published two reports before the CIG was issued. This is primarily because the SRSG on Children and Armed Conflict actually visited Syria herself on two occasions.¹⁷

3.3.2 Chemical Weapons

Paragraph 2.4.6 refers to Chemical Weapons. There have been a lot of rumours around this area with little in the way of concrete facts. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) report refers to reports drafted by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). It therefore makes sense to cite OPCW rather than the FCO, especially as this is whom the FCO is quoting and because OPCW reports provide more relevant detail. For example; with regards to Chemical Weapons in Syria, the fact finding mission found ““compelling information” that a toxic chemical was used “systematically and repeatedly” as a weapon in villages in northern Syria earlier this year. [...] The report says chlorine was used in attacks on the villages of Talmanes, Al Tamanah and Kafr Zeta, all located in northern Syria”. For a full list of OPCW reports and briefings visit the OPCW website.

4 Other suggestions

- 4.1 At paragraph 2.1.1 the BBC website is cited for background information. However, when one clicks on these links it is clear that the wording is slightly different; it probably has been changed since it was last accessed in 2014. It is suggested that a more fixed form of country information such as a report rather than online news be used to source the background information as websites are constantly updated.
- 4.2 Paragraph 2.4.3 refers to a Human Rights Watch Report in April of 2013 that referred to the regime’s “deliberate and indiscriminate” bombing of civilians. The actual HRW report is: Human Rights Watch, Death from The Skies: Deliberate and Indiscriminate Air Strikes on Civilians, 10 April 2013, ISBN: 978-1-62313-0039, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5178e03f4.html> [accessed 10 November 2015]. It is suggested that this reference is directly cited.
- 4.3 At paragraph 2.4.6 reference is made to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office report that in reference to the use of chlorine gas states that “On 29 May the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced a fact-finding mission to Syria to establish the facts around these alleged attacks”. Reference to the original report makes it

¹⁶ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Echoes From Syria Issue 11 - April 2015, April 2015, Protection Sector/ Issue 11, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/555302934.html> [accessed 17 November 2015]

¹⁷ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, 27 January 2014, S/2014/31: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/31&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC and United Nations Security Council, Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, Conclusions on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, 26 November 2014, S/AC.51/2014/4: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/31&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC

clear that this announcement was in-fact made on 29 April.¹⁸ The same paragraph goes on to refer to an interim report prepared by OPCW. As the FCO report does not provide citations, it is difficult to know to which interim report they refer. Statements in the rest of this paragraph such as:

“we cannot say for certain who is responsible, but we know that Syria lied about the existence of their chemical programme for many years and used chemical weapons on a significant scale in 2013”

and in the following one:

“we remain deeply concerned about the gaps and discrepancies in Syria’s declarations to the OPCW. The regime’s history of lies...”

These are opinions of the FCO and not something OPCW would have ever said, especially with staff still inside Syria. All states do not agree with these opinions. It may be a matter of policy for the Home Office to put it in, however it is suggested that the report makes it clear, whose opinions these are. A less detailed reading of these paragraphs may lead one to believe that these are the opinions of OPCW. This is not the case.

4.4 Paragraph 2.4.7: There is a small typo, and _ where a “ should be.

4.5 Paragraph 2.6.1 does not show where the quotes begin or end. It should say:

“The US State Department report covering 2013 noted that “[r]elative freedom....women.”

4.5.1 At paragraph 2.6.2, where the FCO report is cited as stating that “Road networks have been blocked without warning. Several major highways including Tartous-Latakia, Tartous Homs, Latakia-Aleppo, Homs- Hama, Homs-Damascus and Damascus-Jordan ahave been temporarily closed...”. This paragraph no longer appears on the website. It is also noting that the situation on the roads changes rapidly. It is suggested that this is removed from the CIG.

¹⁸ <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-to-undertake-fact-finding-mission-in-syria-on-alleged-chlorine-gas-attacks/> [accessed 10 November 2015]

5 Review of Responses to Information Requests (IRs)

- 5.1 Response to COI request 06/15-030 (Military Service):** Excellent use of the material already gathered and available by the Canadian's and the Danes; no further research required.
- 5.2 Response to COI Request 02/14-123 (Military Service):** Note that the links provided in response to this information request are intranet links and therefore not available to the general public however, I was able to see that this was a reference to the first information request on military service (see comment above) and the Home Office COI on Syria for 2013 for which the correct external link would be: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/312738/Syrian_Arab_Republic_report_2013.pdf
- 5.3 Response to COI request 04/14-134 (Military Service):** The author of this response has used links to previous Information responses that I cannot access with the exception to the two IRs mentioned above that I have seen and commented on. Note that there is a typo in this answer: "Additional sauces" should be "Additional Sources".
- 5.4 Response to COI request 01/15-15 (Daraa)**
On hospitals: Footnote 2 should be updated.¹⁹ However a better footnote would be to refer to the UN habitat city profile of Daraa referred to in footnotes 6 and 7, the correct link is now: <http://unhabitat.org/city-profile-daraa-multi-sector-assessment/>. This document mentions at page 6 that 11 percent of healthcare is operational in Daraa. It further mentions, "Al Balad remaining population has extremely limited access to health service, either through the remaining private clinics, or by crossing into the northern Al Mahatta side which is frequently interrupted. ...Al Mahtaa has access to all remaining operational private hospitals and public clinics"

The nearest military airport: With regards to point 8, it is likely that the nearest military airport to Daraa may be in Sweida,²⁰ but there is no way of knowing for certain. Point 8 starts off talking about an airport but ends the sentence with hospital.

This report demonstrates an excellent use of the UN habitat profiles. UNOCHA also produce governorate profiles, which may, on occasion provide more/different specific information on a governorate.²¹

Both FAO (on Agriculture) and WHO (on health) are in Syria and should in theory be able to provide this information on request.

Response to COI request 05/15-81 (Passport renewal for nationals outside Syria): The link to the first footnote has changed to: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/46dd2a5e2.html>. There is further evidence that the Syrian government appears to have relaxed the rules on the re-

¹⁹ See <https://syriareliefanddevelopment.org/our-programs/health/>.

²⁰ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/06/11/Syria-rebels-seize-most-of-Sweida-military-airport-spokesman-.html>

²¹ See

<http://syria.unocha.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20governorate%20profiles%206%20August%202014.pdf>

issuance of passports²². Whilst the Syrian Embassy in the United Kingdom stopped issuing passports in August 2012,²³ Syrians can send their passports abroad to be renewed.

Moreover, it is worth noting that it is now very easy to get a fake Syrian passport.²⁴ As stated in the NL Times: "Since the outbreak of the Syrian war, thousands of blank passports and the Assad regime's printers have ended up in the hands of Sunni insurgents, according to Revu. These insurgents will sell passports showing any photo given to them to anyone willing to pay."²⁵

- 5.5 Response to COI request 06/15-042 (agreements between Syria and Ukraine):** The response appears well researched. No comments.
- 5.6 Response to COI request 6/15-141 (ISIS and oilfields):** Perhaps the question here is why would it not be possible for a Kurdish person to gain employment as a petroleum engineer with the Syrian government.
- 5.7 Response to COI request 06/15-137 (Security Situation ISIS):** The response given in paragraph one appears to be missing text. The response states:

"There is widespread fighting throughout Syria, including in Damascus and its suburbs. Fullscale military operations involving the use of small arms, tanks, artillery and aircraft are ongoing. In Aleppo and elsewhere, the regime has been undertaking an indiscriminate campaign of aerial bombardment since mid-December 2013, using so called 'barrel' bombs – huge containers packed with explosives and shards of metal dropped by helicopter – against largely civilian targets. The situation remains extremely volatile...Fighting has caused the temporary suspension of commercial flights, closed roads, impeded access to land border crossing points and led to the closure of some border crossings."

However the original FCO website places text between 'ongoing' and 'In Aleppo:

"The situation remains extremely volatile and dangerous. There is widespread fighting throughout Syria, including in Damascus and its suburbs. Full scale military operations involving the use of small arms, tanks, artillery and aircraft are ongoing. [The Syrian government no longer exercises control of large parts of Syria, notably the north, south and east of the country. Areas of eastern Syria are under the effective control of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant \(ISIL\), which is fiercely hostile to the United Kingdom. Beginning on 30 September, Russia has also embarked on a wave of air strikes in Syria backing an offensive launched by troops loyal to the Assad regime. In Aleppo and elsewhere..](#)"

The text above in blue is the text that is missing from the IR request. This information does seem pertinent to the request; therefore I would suggest it is left in. However, in the event that there is a policy reason to leave this information out the quote should make clear by placing a "[...]" where the missing text is, that text is missing.

²² <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/4/26/syria-promises-to-renew-passports-for-citizens-living-abroad>

²³ <http://syremb.com>

²⁴ <https://www.rt.com/news/315591-fake-syrian-passport-journalist/>

²⁵ <http://www.nlimes.nl/2015/09/16/journalist-orders-fake-syrian-passport-for-dutch-pm-mark-rutte/>

5.8 Response to COI Request 02/14-035 (Police Uniforms): This Information Request is well researched but should take into account that it is unlikely that most Syrians would be able to provide the answers in the response provided. Having been inside Syria myself between April 2011 and September 2014 I observed that most police officers wore some type of military-looking uniform, namely in Olive Green. There were occasions when I saw grey shades, say at the airport, in customs and at the border crossings with Lebanon and Jordan but even then many officials wore military outfits. Having spoken to others who were present inside Syria long before the crisis, they do believe that it is possible that the traffic police in Damascus may have changed in 2009 to wearing a whitish color. If this happened, it was short-lived and information does not indicate it was countrywide. In summary, whilst the information provided in answer to the information request is plausible, it should be emphasized that the dark blue, civilian white and grey shades were not the norm, but the exception, as was emphasized in the relevant extracts.

5.9 Response to COI Request 06/14-002 (LGBTI persons)

There is very little evidence of the ill treatment of lesbians in Syria, which should perhaps provide an indication of the magnitude of the problem compared to other societal issues. Links provided to the Syria COI report dated 15 August 2012 no longer work. However, the extract provided in the US Department of State Report that:

“..the law criminalizes any sexual act that is “contrary to nature.” In previous years police used this charge to prosecute lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals. There were no reports of prosecutions under the law during the year; however, reports indicated that the government arrested dozens of gay men and lesbians over the past several years on charges such as abusing social values; selling, buying or consuming illegal drugs; and organizing and promoting “obscene” parties.”

This is supported by other objective material. Namely the guardian article written after the “gay girl in Damascus” scandal, which provides a more balanced picture of the life of a lesbian in Damascus where in 2011; there was allegedly a strong lesbian community.²⁶ Early/ forced marriage is a problem reported throughout and before the crisis but it does not necessarily happen as a result of being gay. It is likely, that the authorities inside Syria are not focusing on this issue, if they ever did, given the current crisis. However, evidence of no/reduced persecution is always hard to find. There is some evidence that gay men are ill treated by ISIS²⁷ although no examples are yet to be found of the targeting of lesbians. In light of this assessment, it is recommended that the Home Office update their advice with information from the cited Guardian article.

5.10 Response to COI Request 05/15-081 (Passport renewal for national outside Syria): The information provided is as thorough as it can be on the issue.

²⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/15/gay-girl-damascus-syrian-lesbians>

²⁷ <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/03/05/middleeast/isis-lgbt-persecution/>