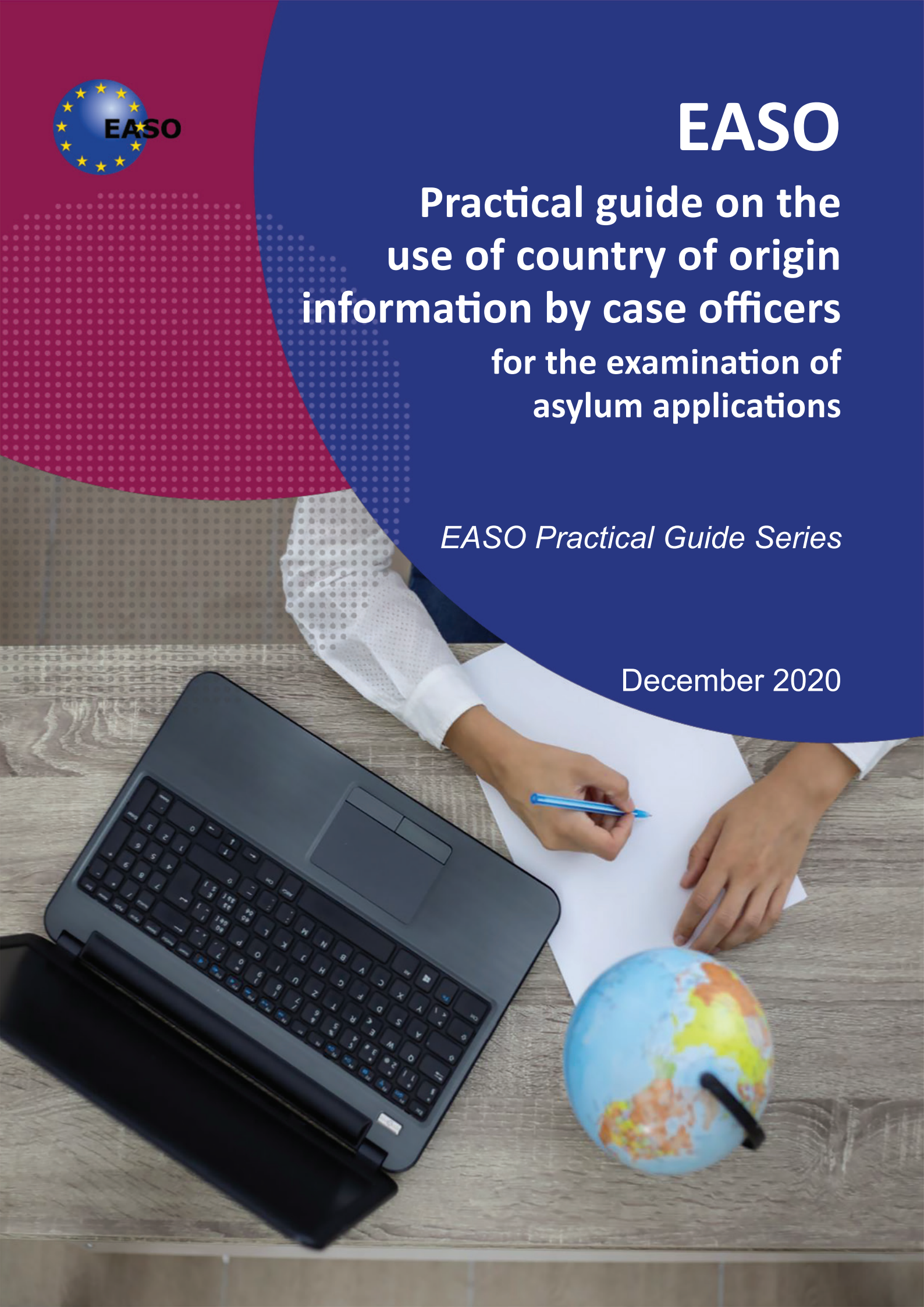
EASO

Practical guide on the use of country of origin information by case officers

for the examination of asylum applications

EASO Practical Guide Series

December 2020



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About the practical guide

Why was this practical guide created? The mission of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) is to support European Union Member States (Member States) through common training, common quality standards and common country of origin information (COI), among other activities. EASO also supports the European Union Associated Countries (referred to collectively with Member States as EU+ countries). According to its overall aim of supporting Member States in achieving common standards and high-quality processes within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), EASO develops common practical tools and guidance.

The *EASO Practical guide on the use of country of origin information by case officers* is intended as a practical tool accompanying case officers across the European Union and beyond in their daily work.

The purpose of the practical guide is to assist case officers with the use of COI at different stages of the procedure – when preparing and conducting the personal interview, and when assessing the application for international protection.

How was this practical guide developed? The guide was developed by experts from EU+ countries, with valuable input from the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) and ARC Foundation. Valuable input was also received from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on earlier versions of the guide; the finalised guide does not necessarily reflect the position of UNCHR. The process was facilitated and coordinated by EASO. Before its finalisation, a consultation on the guide was carried out with all EU+ countries.

Who should use this practical guide? This guide is primarily intended for case officers, interviewers and decision-makers in the national determining authorities. Additionally, this tool is useful for quality officers and legal advisers, as well as any other person working or involved in the field of international protection in the EU context. The practical guide aims to cater to the needs of case officers with various degrees of experience: from junior case officers to experienced ones, as a refresher and reminder.

What is the scope of this practical guide? This guide focuses on the use of COI by case officers in their day-to-day work in international protection procedures. It is not meant to provide guidance for COI researchers. For specialised guidance on COI research, consult the *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*; and the *Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports*. This guide does not contain specialised information on medical COI. For medical COI, EASO has developed the EASO training curriculum module on MedCOI.

How to use this practical guide? The practical guide includes (1) guidance through the different parts of the procedure of examining the application for international protection highlighting the role of COI and its standards; and (2) a checklist, as a practical reminder of recommended steps during different stages of the procedure of examining the application for international protection related to the use of COI.

How does this practical guide relate to national legislation and practice? This is a soft convergence tool to encourage harmonisation of practices. This tool is not legally binding. It reflects commonly agreed standards and incorporates dedicated space for national variances in legislation, guidance and practice.

How does this practical guide relate to other EASO support tools? As with all EASO support tools, the *EASO Practical guide on the use of country of origin information by case officers* is based on the standards of the CEAS. It is built in the same framework and should be seen as a complement to other available EASO tools. Its consistency with those tools has been a primary consideration, especially in relation to the closely related EASO training curriculum module on COI and the *EASO COI Research Methodology*. The EASO practical guides on evidence assessment, personal interview, qualification for international protection and exclusion also constituted valuable sources of information in the development of this tool, as well as the judicial practical guide on country of origin information.

All EASO practical guides and tools are available at: https://www.easo.europa.eu/practical-tools.

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List of abbreviations

ACCORD	Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation
APD (recast)	Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast)
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
COI	country of origin information
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU+ countries	Member States of the European Union and Associated States
IGO	intergovernmental organisation
IPA	internal protection alternative
ISIS	the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
Member States	Member States of the European Union
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PRADO	Public Register of Authentic travel and identity Documents Online
Refugee Convention	Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), as amended by its Protocol (1967), also referred to as the Geneva Convention in the European Union asylum *acquis*
QD (recast)	Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

Country of origin information (COI) is crucial for the examination of the application for international protection. It enables case officers to assess applicants' statements and other evidence concerning their need for protection, and to establish whether the applicant qualifies for international protection.

The *EASO Practical guide on the use of country of origin information by case officers for the examination of asylum applications* is based on the legal provisions of the Qualification Directive (recast) (hereinafter QD recast) ([1])) and the Asylum Procedures Directive (recast) (hereinafter APD (recast) ([2])). It supports the correct application of the legal provisions by presenting COI standards and by highlighting the role of COI at different stages of the international protection procedures.

The main focus of the practical guide is on the use of COI by case officers for the examination of an application for international protection. Due to the complexity of the examination procedure, the guide also provides useful tips and guidance of a more general nature about the use of COI in the examination process. It also contains information related to conducting COI research as well as the methodology in order to support case officers searching for COI. This is especially important in cases where COI experts or a dedicated COI unit are not available. Though this guide provides guidance on the research, use and methodology of COI, it cannot replace the expertise of COI experts or a dedicated COI unit. Where COI experts or a dedicated COI unit are not available, it is recommended that the case officer develops their knowledge further by, for example, reading the *EASO COI Research Methodology* and other documents published by the EASO COI sector. It is also recommended to follow the EASO training curriculum module on the topic of country of origin information. If COI experts are available, it is preferable that they are consulted on a regular basis.

The practical guide is separated into five chapters. The introductory chapter explains what COI is and why it is necessary to use COI. It lays out the quality standards and procedural concepts applying to the use of COI and describes how to ensure that high quality COI is used. In the following chapters, the guide presents the use of COI in the different stages of the asylum procedure – when preparing and conducting the personal interview and when carrying out the credibility assessment and the risk assessment of the application for international protection. In this part, guidance is provided on the use of COI (a) in order to investigate an applicant's identity and country of origin; (b) to be able to assess credibility of the claim; and (c) to be able to assess the fear upon return. Throughout these chapters, the guide includes practical information related to the examination of an application and the COI methodology. The final sections contains information about COI sources and tips for COI research.

In order to better illustrate the use of COI in the process of examination an application for international protection, different examples based on four concrete asylum cases are used throughout the practical guide. These include asylum seekers from Cameroon, Colombia, Iraq and Syria. It should be noted that no general conclusions should be drawn based on these examples, which are provided only for educational purposes. In the same sense, the currency of the COI provided in the guide, which can become outdated, should be taken into account.

([1]) Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast).

([2]) Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast).

1. Basic characteristics of COI

1.1 What is COI?

COI refers to information about countries of origin, habitual residence and transit or return countries, that is used in procedures for the individual assessment of applications for international protection. COI may also be used in the context of non-asylum related migration cases, for example when assessing health-related applications (see below). COI aims to answer questions about countries of origin relating to, for example, the socioeconomic, legal, political, human rights, security and humanitarian situation or conflict at a given time ([3]).

Medical country of origin information (medical COI) refers to specific medical and health-related information in countries of origin of third-country nationals that are relevant for assessing health-related applications.

The quality of COI depends on its sources. Wherever possible, COI should be derived from a variety of publicly available sources. Sometimes, the information can be confidential/restricted or the source can be confidential/anonymous due to security and other reasons. In such cases, the quality and reliability of the source needs to be ascertained.

To qualify as COI, it is essential that the source of the information has **no vested interest** in the outcome of an individual application for international protection.

It is important, also, to highlight that personal documents submitted by an applicant is not COI.

COI may be used at different stages of the procedure: during the preparation of the interview, when conducting the interview and when assessing the application for international protection. COI helps you to become familiar with the general political, security and/or socioeconomic situation in a country of origin and supports them in examining the core substance of an application for international protection.

COI does not dictate decisions, it supports the evidence assessment. It informs country guidance and legal assessments but is distinct from it.

Although COI is important for the assessment of an application for international protection, **COI has its limitations**. COI is rarely conclusive as to the merits of a claim and it cannot be used to answer all questions pertaining to a case. The extent to which it may support the assessment of an individual case depends on a variety of factors, including the extent to which the claim is based on personal circumstances or how well information on a particular topic is documented in a particular country of origin. Restrictions or difficulties in reporting in the country of origin may limit the availability of information about a particular subject and thus should always be taken into consideration.

([3]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, p. 5.

COI provides the context or relevant background to the applicant's account of events and offers a frame of reference to help to understand and assess possible future risk. In case little information was found, or information could not be corroborated, this has to be taken into account when evaluating the statements and the evidence provided. However, lack of COI does not mean that an event has not taken place, that a situation did not occur, or that a person or an organisation does not exist.

1.2 Why is it obligatory to use COI?

The obligation to use COI when assessing applications for international protection derives from EU legislation, specifically from the two core directives relevant for the examination of an application for international protection, the QD (recast) and the APD (recast), but also from European jurisprudence, in particular the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ([4]).

Article 4(3)(a) QD (recast)

The assessment of an application for international protection is to be carried out on an individual basis and includes taking into account:

(a) all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin at the time of taking a decision on the application, including laws and regulations of the country of origin and the manner in which they are applied.

Article 10(3)(b) APD (recast)

Member States shall ensure that decisions by the determining authority on applications for international protection are taken after an appropriate examination. To that end, Member States shall ensure that:

[…]

(b) precise and up-to-date information is obtained from various sources, such as EASO and UNHCR and relevant international human rights organisations, as to the general situation prevailing in the countries of origin of applicants and, where necessary, in countries through which they have transited, and that such information is made available to the personnel responsible for examining applications and taking decisions;

([4]) More examples of ECtHR judgments can be found in EASO, *Judicial practical guide on country of origin information – Compilation of jurisprudence*, 2018.

ECtHR jurisprudence	
Case name	**Key words / relevance / main points**
Sufi and Elmi v *the United Kingdom*	In assessing the weight to be attributed to country material, consideration must be given to its source, in particular its independence, reliability and objectivity. In respect of reports, the authority and reputation of the author, the seriousness of the investigations by means of which they were compiled, the consistency of their conclusions and their corroboration by other sources are all relevant considerations. Consideration must be given to the presence and reporting capacities of the author of the material in the country in question ([5]).
Saadi v *Italy*	As regards reliability of the source, the court points out the authority and reputation of the authors of reports, the seriousness of the investigations by means of which they were compiled, the fact that on the points in question their conclusions are consistent with each other and that those conclusions are corroborated in substance by numerous other sources. The Court has often attached importance to the information contained in recent reports from independent international human rights protection associations such as Amnesty International, or governmental sources, including the United States State Department ([6]).
Salah Sheekh v *the Netherlands*	The Court must be satisfied that the assessment made by the authorities of the contracting state is adequate and sufficiently supported by domestic materials as well as by materials originating from other, reliable and objective sources, such as, for instance, other contracting or non-contracting states, agencies of the United Nations and reputable non-governmental organisations (NGOs) ([7]).
For more examples, refer to the EASO, *Judicial practical guide on country of origin information – Compilation of jurisprudence*, 2018.	

Member States have a duty to investigate with regard to the elements listed in the Article 4 QD (recast), which is separate from the applicant's duty to substantiate the application. This duty applies, inter alia, to obtaining information about the country of origin. This is especially important in situations in which the burden of proof shifts towards the determining authority, e.g. when applying the internal protection alternative (IPA) or considering exclusion (see Section 3.3.3. Internal protection and Chapter 4. Exclusion).

([5]) ECtHR, judgment of 28 June 2011, *Sufi and Elmi* v *the United Kingdom*, Nos 8319/07 and 11449/07, ECLI:CE:ECHR:2011:0628JUD000831907.
([6]) ECtHR, judgment of 28 February 2008, *Saadi* v *Italy*, No 37201/06, ECLI:CE:ECHR:2008:0228JUD003720106.
([7]) ECtHR, judgment of 11 January 2007, *Salah Sheekh* v *the Netherlands*, No 1948/04, ECLI:CE:ECHR:2007:0111JUD000194804.

1.3 Important procedural concepts when using COI

The procedural concepts are important when carrying out COI research, but more importantly, when applying and using COI to make assessments of applications for international protection.

The core **procedural concepts** for researching and using COI ([8]) are:

- **Equality of arms** of the parties concerned in asylum proceedings regarding access to information in appeal proceedings. This principle aims at ensuring fairness of the procedure. To allow for an effective remedy, all parties should have access to the information on which the decision is based, unless the information is classified. As regards disclosure of information classified as 'restricted', please refer to your national practice.
- **Using public information as much as possible**, since publicly accessible information is open to review and scrutiny by the applicant, the decision-making and the judicial bodies. However, there can be situations where the source is confidential/anonymous, for example due to security reasons and the source protection. In other situations, the information can be classified as confidential/restricted and not meant for dissemination beyond the immediate proceedings. In such cases, the information has to be assessed, weighed and used appropriately in relation to the other evidence. Also, in case of an appeal, the court needs to be enabled to respect the principle of the equality of arms taking into account the necessary safeguards to respect the confidentiality of the information.
- **Data protection**. The personal data of an applicant and information that potentially may make the applicant identifiable must be protected and should never – directly or indirectly – be shared with the alleged persecutor.

1.4 COI quality standards

The QD (recast) and the APD (recast) not only oblige you to take into account COI but also refer to recognised COI quality standards ([9]).

COI **Quality Standards** for the assessment of sources and validation of information have been developed by different stakeholders at international ([10]) and EU level. The EU Common Guidelines for Processing COI 2008 ([11]), the ACCORD Training Manual 2013 ([12]), the EASO COI Report Methodology 2019 ([13]) and the jurisprudence of the ECtHR among others share many common standards, especially those illustrated below.

([8]) ACCORD, *Researching country of origin information Training Manual*, 2013 edition, pp. 36–38.
([9]) Recital 39 APD (recast) and Article 8(2) QD (recast).
([10]) Earlier standards were developed by UNHCR, *Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Cooperation*, February 2004; International Association of Refugee Law Judges, *Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information (COI): A Checklist*, November 2006.
([11]) ECOI, *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI)*, April 2008.
([12]) ACCORD, *Researching country of origin information Training Manual*, 2013 edition.
([13]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, June 2019.

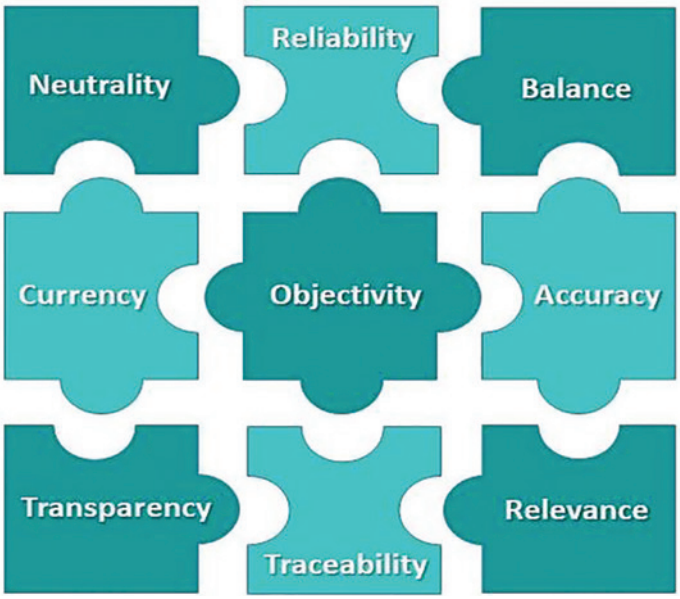


Figure 1. COI quality standards

Neutrality	COI research should be conducted in a neutral manner without seeking to favour a particular outcome or conclusion.
Reliability	Decisions on international protection needs should be based on COI from reliable sources, taking into account the source's credibility, political and ideological context as well as its mandate, reporting methodology, its funding, background and motivation.
Balance	As each source has its own perspective and focus, different sources and different types of sources should be consulted to achieve the most comprehensive and balanced picture possible.
Currency	Up-to-date or the most recent, and time-relevant, COI should be used. Sometimes COI may be used that is not current where relevant (reference to past events which need to be verified, or to give an historical conceptual background on the subject).
Objectivity	COI should be fact-based and not influenced by emotions, speculation, personal or group-based prejudices, interests or biases.

Accuracy	There should be conformity between the statement or opinion, or information with the factual reality or truth. Accuracy can be achieved by cross-checking and corroborating information.
Transparency	COI should be clearly presented and its meaning must not be distorted. It should be clear, intelligible, and unequivocal about the methods for how research decisions were made, information was obtained, assessed, and presented.
Traceability	The extent to which the primary and/or original source of a piece of information can be identified. COI should be fully referenced and cited clearly to enable readers to independently verify and assess the information. Every piece of information should be traceable to its source, preferably the original source.
Relevance	COI is relevant when it is based on questions rooted in legal concepts of refugee and human rights law or on questions derived from an applicant's statements and is closely connected to the fact, event, or matter in question.

These standards ensure that COI meets all necessary procedural and quality requirements in order to be used in international protection procedures. They play a role in different phases of the whole international protection procedure, in particular:

- **when formulating research questions based on the case at hand**: to ensure that topics for COI research are relevant with regards to the essential elements of the statements of the applicant and the key legal questions that need to be answered for the examination of the application for international protection;
- **when conducting COI research**: to ensure that research is done in a neutral manner, without seeking to favour a particular outcome or conclusion, in order to achieve the maximum possible quality and validity;
- **when selecting, assessing and validating different sources of information**: to guarantee that the COI stems from reliable sources and that a wide range and balanced mix of sources were used;
- **when evaluating COI**: to ensure that the sources and the information are relevant to the case, reliable, accurate and current (or time-relevant) in line with COI quality standards;
- **when referring to COI in decisions**: to ensure that information is presented in a neutral way and that the COI is referred to in a traceable and transparent way.

When COI is selected from different sources, both the sources and the information have to be assessed against quality criteria. Please note that there is a difference between 'information' and 'source'. In this practical guide we use the following definitions used by the EASO COI Report methodology ([14]).

- **Information** is the content or data provided by a source.
- A **source** is a medium, person or institution producing information:
  - A primary source is closely or directly related to (i.e. having first-hand information of) an event, fact, or matter.
  - An original source documents an event, fact or matter straight from the source for the first time. The original source can also be the primary source.
  - A secondary source reproduces or refers to information from the original source (or other secondary sources).

Another important distinction should be made between sources and databases/portals. A database/portal is generally a platform containing information from a variety of different types of sources. A database/portal is a provider of information, but it is normally not a source itself. Detailed information about COI portals and databases can be found in Chapter 5. COI research and COI sources.

1.5 The importance of source assessment

In order to assess whether the sources are reliable and provide accurate and relevant information related to the case, it is always necessary to assess the sources individually on their own merits against the quality standards. This will help to achieve the maximum possible assurance of COI quality in line with common standards. Thus, it is of utmost importance you are aware of the criteria to assess sources and validate information.

Although in practice source assessment and validation of information ([15]) are often carried out together, these are two different concepts. Source assessment deals with the quality of the source. For instance, a high-quality report from a reliable source may contain outdated information just because time has passed and things have happened in the meantime. That will not lead to the conclusion that the source as such is not reliable. It just means that more current information needs to be found to validate and corroborate the information. A source assessment can also lead to the conclusion that a specific source cannot be relied on in general, or with regard to specific topics, or can only be used for describing one point of view, but not as describing a situation in an objective manner. More information about the source assessment can be found in the *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology* ([16]).

Information is accurate when it is a true representation of an event or situation. Objectivity is the quality of being fact-based and not influenced by emotions, speculation, personal or group-based prejudices,

([14]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, pp. 12–14.
([15]) Validation is the process of evaluation of information. Validation of the information can be done by way of scrutinising the origin of information provided by every source, and by way of cross-checking, corroborating and balancing the information with information of other sources. EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, pp. 14–15.
([16]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019.

interests or biases. Information is current when it is the most up-to-date information available, including situations where the information is not recent but where the circumstances have not changed since the release of the information. When assessing the reliability of a source, the following 'source assessment' questions are helpful.

Who is providing the information? Is this clear or is the source anonymous? What is their mandate? What is their reputation? Does the source have specific knowledge that makes them an 'expert' on the issue at hand? Does the source have a known bias? What is the context in which the source operates?

What information is provided? What is the nature of the information produced (e.g. media article, eyewitness account, press release, opinion piece, position paper, etc.)? To what extent is it fact-based and documented? Is it delivered independently of the motivation of the source?

Why is the source providing this information? What is the agenda or mandate of the source? Does the source have a specific interest (e.g. to inform, advocate, fundraise, etc.)?

How is the information presented? Is the material presented in an objective and transparent way? Is it clear what research methods are used? How is the information gathered by the source? Is the language and style of writing neutral or biased? Is the information traceable and the source of information transparent?

When was the information gathered and when was it provided ([17])?

When looking at the different sources, the question may arise if certain sources are more valuable or reliable than others. For instance, do media sources have the same value as UN sources when assessing COI as a basis for a decision? Should more weight be given to a governmental report than a paper published by a NGO?

In this context, it is important to stress that each source has its own mandate and/or mission and that no general hierarchy of sources exists. The usefulness and authority of each source depends on the question that needs to be answered. Each source should be assessed in its own right, and conclusions should be drawn on the reliability of the source only after a thorough source assessment. This means that you should not exclude a source without further consideration and assessment.

1.6 COI and country-specific guidance

To facilitate the assessment of applications for international protection, asylum authorities may provide different types of COI products as well as other non-COI tools, such as country-specific policy or guidance documents. It is crucial to understand the difference between COI products and policy/guidance documents and their respective functions.

Country-specific guidance and policy documents are produced by asylum authorities to assist their case officers, to foster convergence and make decision-making more efficient by giving advice and direction on how cases should be assessed. They set out the authorities' overall or topic-specific assessment and

([17]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, Annex 2: Glossary.

policy regarding applications from the particular country, by assessing the relevant elements according to the national, international and EU legislation (in particular the QD (recast)). These documents present a **legal interpretation** and evaluation of the situation in a given country. This is the main distinction from COI. COI is the factual basis (COI evidence) on which these guidance and policy documents are developed and they may often refer to COI to illustrate the reasoning for a particular decision. However, it is important to understand that guidance and policy documents are not COI in themselves and should not be used or referenced as sources of COI. Some national policy/guidance documents are combined with COI, such as for example the Country Policy and Information Notes produced by the United Kingdom Home Office.

The Country Guidance documents published by EASO also contain COI summaries, which illustrate the factual basis for the assessment but which are summarised from the original COI reports. The original COI reports cited should be consulted as a basis for the assessment in each individual case and cited if used. More information about EASO's work on Country Guidance can be found in the country guidance section of the EASO website: https://easo.europa.eu/country-guidance.

UNHCR also issues country-specific guidance, including *Eligibility Guidelines* and *International Protection Considerations*, to assist case officers, including UNHCR staff, governments and practitioners in assessing the international protection needs of asylum seekers ([18]). These documents are not COI, but contain the original sources of COI in the footnotes.

It is important to emphasise that country guidance should not be confused with **COI conclusions (COI analysis).** COI reports may contain sections with 'conclusions' or 'analyses'. Unlike country guidance, these sections however do not include legal assessments, policy or decision guidance. These conclusions are intended to highlight patterns and trends within the available information about a situation in the country of origin, avoiding at the same time overgeneralisation. COI conclusions are **pure COI** and are based on the synthesised and referenced COI from a variety of sources. More information can be found in the *EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) report methodology* ([19]).

([18]) They are legal interpretations of the refugee criteria in respect of specific profiles on the basis of social, economic, security, human rights and humanitarian conditions in the country/territory of origin concerned. UNHCR issues such country guidance documents under its mandate, as part of its responsibility to supervise the application of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, as amended by its Protocol (1967).

([19]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, pp. 20–21.

2. COI and the examination of the application for international protection

Nearly every application for international protection gives rise to certain questions and topics that have to be further explored, and which may be answered by COI. Sometimes, information of a general nature is needed to build an overall picture of the situation in a country. In other cases, quite detailed case- or topic-specific information about, for example, a certain ethnic group or a political incident is needed in order to gain an understanding of a crucial element of a case or to assess the credibility of the applicant.

2.1 Different roles of COI in the examination process

COI helps you deal with different aspects of the examination of an application, such as:

- to become familiar with the general political, security, human rights and/or socioeconomic situation in a country of origin.

  Knowing the situation in the country of origin of the applicant and other relevant information reflecting the known details of a case is a crucial first step for the preparation of the interview. There is a risk of overlooking or misunderstanding certain material facts ([20]) related to the claim if you do not know the type of human rights abuses occurring in a country or you may miss the existence of a particular social group if you do not know the social attitudes in a certain country. In some cases the applicants may not have the capacity to clearly formulate their problems and your knowledge regarding the situation in the country of origin is important to establish the relevant elements of the application.

- to assess the **external credibility** of the relevant claims ([21]).

  External credibility refers to consistency with evidence authored by a third party (i.e. not the applicant): COI, known facts and other pieces of evidence collected by the determining authority. COI helps you to corroborate details of the applicant's testimony.

- to assess the elements that substantiate or do not substantiate an applicant's **need for international protection**: the applicant's well-founded fear of persecution, including future risk, different types of harm, specific aspects of the grounds for international protection ([22]), the indiscriminate violence, the protection possibilities, the application of IPA.

  Protection-related topics are connected to the substance of the claim for international protection. COI helps you to assess the potential risk that the applicants face in their country of origin.

  COI can relate to the applicant's fear of being persecuted for reasons specified in Article 10 QD (recast) (race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion), or

([20]) Material facts are facts that are directly linked to the definition of refugee (Article 1(A)(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Article 2(d) QD (recast)) or of person eligible for subsidiary protection (Article 2(f) and Article 15 QD (recast)) and go to the core of the application. It is usually redundant to focus on minor or non-essential facts that do not affect the central elements of the claim. Refer to EASO, *Practical Guide: Evidence assessment*, March 2015.

([21]) For more information see Section 3.3.1. Credibility assessment.

([22]) For more information see Section 3.3.2. Risk assessment.

to whether an applicant is eligible for subsidiary protection under Article 15 QD (recast). COI can also relate to the assessment of the sufficiency of protection in an applicant's country of origin, including IPA.

- to assess if an applicant should be **excluded** from international protection.
  Similarly to the protection-related topics, COI helps you to detect and to assess potential exclusion clauses ([23]).

The illustrative cases used throughout this guide

In order to better illustrate the use of COI in the process of examination an application for international protection, different examples based on four concrete cases will be used throughout the following chapters of the practical guide. Please note that no general conclusions should be drawn based on these examples which are provided only for educational purposes. At the same time, please note that the COI provided in the guide might get outdated.

Case of an applicant from Iraq

The applicant is a **single mother** with two children from Iraq. She has no identity documents. She is **Yazidi**, in her 40s and has attended 6 years of compulsory education. She was born in **Sinjar**, a town close to Mosul. The reason for fleeing her country of origin is the invasion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (**ISIS**) in August 2014. She left home with her family and stayed a whole week in the nearby mountains without any food or water. During this week, her mother died as well as other members of her extended family. She does not wish to return home due to the **violence and maltreatment** she has suffered. In addition, she considers the **security situation** in the Mosul area too unstable for her and her two young children.

Case of an applicant from Syria

The applicant is a **single man** born in Homs. He is **Sunni Muslim** and in 2013 he participated in the **demonstrations in Homs** as a university student. In 2015, he moved to Hama and later on, in 2018, he moved to Sarmin. Due to the security situation he left Sarmin and travelled with a Syrian passport to Turkey and then entered Greece. He does not wish to return home due to the **security situation** and the **compulsory army conscription**.

([23]) For more information see Section 4. Exclusion.

Case of an applicant from Cameroon

The applicant is a **single man** born in **Douala**. He had a boyfriend as a teenager. This relationship ended 3 years later due to his partner's departure abroad. One year later, he met another man. When they were in a restaurant, overcome by emotion, his partner kissed the applicant openly and his **sexual orientation** was made public. Thus, in December of the same year, while he was accompanied by his boyfriend to his family home, residents of his neighbourhood **vandalised the family vehicle**; his boyfriend escaped. Fearing for his safety, he left the country and does not wish to return because he is afraid of being **sentenced and imprisoned because of being homosexual**. He does not hold a travel document but he has a birth certificate.

Case of an applicant from Colombia

The applicant is a **single woman** born in 1993 in **Cali**, the capital of Valle del Cauca in Colombia. She holds a Colombian passport that was issued in 2017. She is Catholic and she studied social work at the Universidad del Valle. Later on, she started working as a **social worker** for an NGO, which aims to keep disadvantaged youth away from criminality. The reason for fleeing Colombia is because she was **threatened by Las Águilas Negras** (a paramilitary organisation/ criminal group) due to her job. They threatened to kill her unless she quit her job and paid a large sum of money to them. Her family could not afford to pay this money and decided to help her flee the country.

2.2 Formulating research questions

In order to be able to proceed with the examination of the aspects introduced in Section 2.1. Different roles of COI in the examination process, you should be able to formulate **research questions** that will address the relevant issues at the heart of the case. Formulating research questions is necessary when you are searching for COI on your own but also when you are sending a query to a COI unit ([24]).

Research questions can be relevant at any stage in the international protection status determination process. However, it is important that the research questions are precisely formulated in order to avoid losing time with unproductive COI research. For example, when formulating research questions, apart from generally familiarising yourself with the situation in a country of origin, you should make sure that the research questions are essential to determine the credibility of an applicant's statements, the need

([24]) For more information see Section 2.2.1. Requesting the assistance of COI experts.

for international protection, risk on return, etc. You should therefore not embark on COI research before having a clear idea of what the material facts are and which key questions you need to answer.

A useful **method to formulate concrete research questions** is to start by identifying the general relevant theme(s) that need to be assessed and then narrowing the theme(s) down to more specific topics and questions.

Example from the Cameroon case

To illustrate this, we will use the case of the Cameroonian asylum seeker claiming persecution because of his sexual orientation. To assess the need of protection, the general theme that you will need to collect COI is:

- the situation of homosexual persons in Cameroon.

You can further narrow it down into more specific topics:

- state treatment of homosexual persons in Cameroon;
- societal treatment of homosexual persons in Cameroon;
- state protection for homosexual persons in Cameroon.

From these topics, more specific research questions can be derived.

As regards the state treatment of homosexual persons in Cameroon:

- What does Cameroonian law say about sexual behaviour between persons of the same gender?

After some initial research, you may have found that same-sex sexual acts are prohibited according to Cameroonian law. Knowing this, you might need to search for the following information:

- Are the laws prohibiting same-sex sexual acts enforced in Cameroon?
- Are there examples of homosexual persons being subjected to extrajudicial violence, arbitrary detention, extortion, humiliation, etc. from state actors in Cameroon?

As regards the societal treatment of homosexual persons in Cameroon:

- What is the overall societal climate towards homosexuals in Cameroon? And narrowing the topic further, for example:
    - Are there instances of hate speech in the media, on social media or in the public discourse directed against homosexual persons?

As regards the state protection of homosexual persons in Cameroon:

As a starting point it is always important to know who all the actors of persecution are and what protection the state provides in general. In this particular example, there is no need for further exploration of the availability of the state protection since from previous research we know that there is ill-treatment against homosexual persons by the state. However, if only societal ill-treatment were detected, further research on state protection would be necessary.

When formulating a research question, do not forget to consider whether it is possible or not to find COI for very specific information. In the example of the Cameroonian asylum seeker, you may be unlikely to find information about a specific incident from his story, such as that the family car was attacked and vandalised. You could instead consider looking for more general information about whether any type of violence and abuse against homosexual men occurs in Cameroon by any actor (society, family, friends, etc.).

Furthermore, when formulating a research question you should keep in mind all the specifics of each case, such as vulnerabilities or other personal aspects.

2.2.1 Requesting the assistance of COI experts

Some national administrations have specific COI units or COI experts dedicated to providing answers to COI related questions when a case officer is in need of assistance. When available, COI experts can provide expertise on matters such as search techniques and source assessment. Within the unit, there might also be COI experts specialised in certain countries or regions who are doing the research and provide the necessary relevant information. For this reason, when they are available in your national asylum system, it is advisable to contact these experts.

When reaching out to COI experts for support, you may take advantage of the following tips, depending on the national practice:

- before requesting assistance, conduct basic research on main COI portals;
- indicate in your request the sources and information you have already found/checked;
- define appropriate and precise research questions in an impartial manner ([25]).

It is a good practice to note down for yourself each question for which the answer will be essential to conclude the assessment of the case.

A question for the COI expert/unit should be **formulated objectively** in order to ensure that the approach to collect COI is neutral and impartial (not influenced by any interest in the outcome, not

([25]) Depending on national practice, there might be specific form that you have to submit to the COI unit/experts when requesting specific COI information.

particularly looking for COI that would support only a negative or only a positive decision). For this reason, COI research questions that are leading or manipulative should be avoided.

An example of an inappropriately formulated request for COI

– I need COI confirming there is no risk of persecution for a Sunni man returned to Iraq.

Examples of legally formulated questions to be avoided

– What is the risk of persecution if a Sunni man is returned to Iraq?

– Does he have an internal protection alternative?

The above questions are the domain of decision-making and assessment, and are not appropriate for COI expert/unit. These questions should be reformulated to be neutral and fact-based for COI research, such as:

– How are Sunni males treated by state and non-state groups upon returning from abroad?

– Do Sunni males encounter difficulties when relocating within Iraq?

When there is no national COI unit and there is need to contact external experts, you should refer to national practice.

3. Use of COI at different stages of the examination of the application for international protection

In every phase of the procedure – when preparing for the interview, when conducting the interview and when assessing the application for international protection – you as a case officer need to be well informed about recent developments in the country of origin of the applicant and all relevant COI related to the individual case.

We will now examine each phase separately and in further detail.

As a starting point, see the crucial steps in the table below.

Table 1. The crucial steps of the phases of the procedure of the examination of an application for international protection.

When preparing for the personal interview	When conducting the personal interview	When assessing the application
• Gain background information about the applicant's country • Obtain updated information about the current security, human rights and political situation in the applicant's country • Identify, to the extent possible, the material facts ([26]) which need to be investigated and prepare relevant questions • Come up with an interview plan	• Confirm or question the credibility of information provided by the applicant • Ask relevant questions with regards to COI • Collect additional COI to the possible extent	• Assess credibility • Assess risks • Assess protection aspects (including IPA, when relevant) • Assess exclusion (when relevant)

([26]) Material facts are facts that are directly linked to the definition of a refugee (Article 1(A)(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Article 2(d) QD (recast)) or of person eligible for subsidiary protection (Article 2(f) and Article 15 QD (recast)) and go to the core of the application. It is usually redundant to focus on minor or non-essential facts that do not affect the central elements of the claim. Refer to EASO, *Practical Guide: Evidence assessment*, March 2015.

3.1 Preparing for the personal interview

Before the interview, thorough case preparation is crucial in order to gain clearer understanding of the specific case and to prepare an interview plan that is tailor-made to the individual applicant. At this stage, you should pay attention to the key elements available from the case file. It is crucial to familiarise yourself with the information about the applicant and their country of origin. Lack of knowledge could have a negative impact on your ability to follow the applicant's statements and to ask questions necessary for exploring material facts, well-founded fear, risks and other elements essential for decision-making. This could risk asking irrelevant questions, which could consequently undermine your authority or break the trust of the applicant. As a result, lack of knowledge can not only jeopardise the interview but also the ability to fulfil the shared burden of proof and so violate Article 4 QD (recast).

For this reason, it is necessary to familiarise yourself with updated COI before conducting the interview. This includes the general situation in the country of origin, such as the human rights situation, the security situation, government, religious groups, ethnic groups, cultural aspects, administrative divisions, recent history, etc. It also includes information about the applicant that is already available in the file. For example, during the registration procedure, applicants are usually asked to provide personal information such as age, gender, the place of birth and the place of residence, nationality, ethnicity, the language spoken, religion, family status, education, work experience, travel routes, the reasons for applying for international protection, etc. Your next step will be to consider these elements in terms of international protection needs, identify material facts that need to be explored during the interview and possible future risks for the applicant. Look for specific COI related to the material facts and the risks and prepare an interview plan. Keep in mind indicators for exclusion.

Let us return to the examples of applicants presented previously and see what needs to be addressed before the interview with regards to COI.

Example from the Iraq case

The applicant only provided information about the country of origin (Iraq), the place of birth (Sinjar), the ethnicity/religion (Yazidi) and the family status (single mother with two children). The reason for fleeing her country of origin is the invasion of ISIS in August 2014. The applicant has no documents.

After getting familiar with the **general human rights and security situation** in Iraq and considering the known facts about the applicant in terms of international protection needs, you will list what needs to be explored during the interview and look for relevant COI.

Collecting information related to the credibility assessment. In this example, taking into account that the applicant does not have any identity documents and the importance and relevance of the place of residence and the religious profile of the applicant, think about information you will need when exploring the applicant's identity. For example, general COI about Iraq and **the town and region** where the

applicant was born are relevant for examining the applicant's nationality and the place of residence. In the same way, you should focus on general information about Yazidis. Next, you should search for information about the **situation during the invasion of ISIS in August 2014** in order to examine if the applicant was present during these events. More specifically, the chronology of the events, the actors involved, the consequences for civilians in the secondary area, etc. Furthermore, the situation of the Yazidis during the conflict in Sinjar and any human rights violations they may have experienced.

Collecting information related to the protection needs. Check COI about the **current security situation** in Sinjar and in the province of Ninewa where it is situated, treatment of Yazidis by ISIS, authorities and surrounding society, how different ethnic groups such as the Yazidis, the Kurds and the Arab Iraqis currently interact. You should also have a thorough understanding of the current situation in terms of availability of **state protection** in Ninewa.

Collecting information related to IPA. The final step may be to look at the security situation and availability of the state protection in the parts of the country that might be suitable for internal protection alternative, while reflecting also the applicant's profile.

Taking into account all the information you have obtained, you will be able to fill the interview plan with concrete questions and ask the applicant relevant questions.

In this regard, it is advisable to prepare **more specific questions on facts that we know are verifiable** due to the prior preparation and familiarisation with COI. If asking questions that are too general, you will probably receive answers of similar character and the possibility to examine them against the credibility indicators will be limited. At the same time, it is very difficult to corroborate very specific facts and details after the interview. It will not help you to reach a conclusion on the applicant's place of origin, if you only receive an answer that there is a square and a market in the village, since such places can be found elsewhere. Similarly, if you fail to find the names of the square and market provided by the applicant, it does not mean that they do not exist. For this reason, besides asking open questions, you should also think about more specific questions in order to obtain additional information that can be corroborated, for example:

- Where exactly is (a specific place that the applicant previously mentioned) located?
- How do you get tvhere from (the name of a place)?

Example from the Syria case

The applicant provided information about the place of origin, family status, religion, places of previous stay, education, and the reason for leaving the country of origin. After getting familiar with the **general human rights and security situation** in Syria and considering the known facts about the applicant in terms of international protection needs, you will list what needs to be explored during the interview and look for relevant COI.

Collecting information related to the credibility assessment. Similarly to the case above, after familiarising yourself with the **general security and human rights situation** in Syria, it will be necessary to look at general information about **Syria, Homs, the university and Sunni Muslims** in order to examine the applicant's identity. In this regard, it would also be useful to find COI about the possibility to obtain a passport in Syria. You will then need to collect specific COI regarding the events and actors (political/military) involved in Homs, Hama and Sarmin at the time of the applicant's stay before fleeing Syria. This includes, for example, information about the **demonstrations in Homs in 2013.**

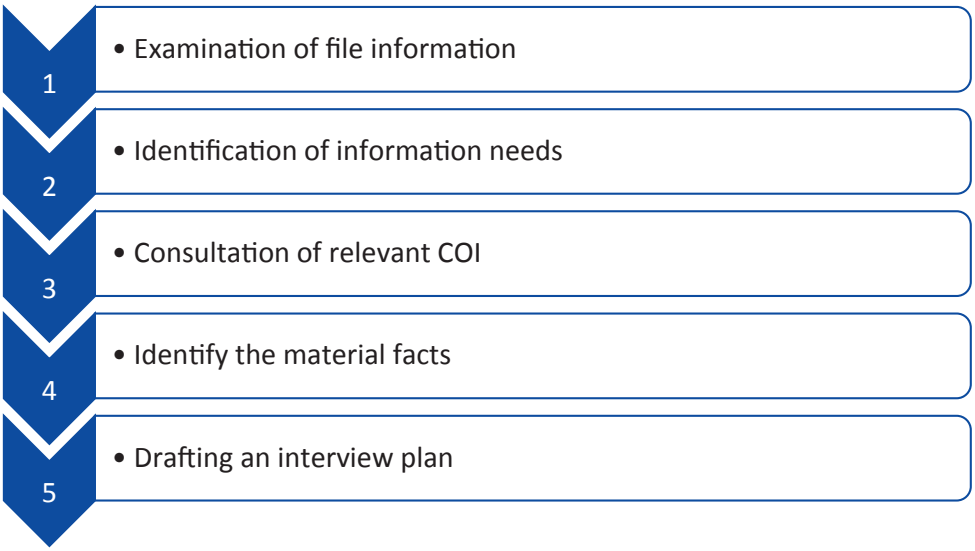
Collecting information related to the protection needs. Next you need to have a clear picture about the **current security, political and human rights situation** in Syria. In this regard, you should also consider the applicant's religious identity as a Sunni Muslim. You will need information about the situation of Syrians who participated in anti-regime demonstrations. Lastly, considering the applicant's age, you should also collect information about **military service** and conscription, including the rules, treatment of conscripts and acts conscripts are involved in.

Information you found in preparation of the interview will help you to decide whether more follow-up questions need to be asked during the interview or not. At the same time, COI will help you to avoid asking unnecessary questions and focus on questions relevant for the decision-making. COI can also help to detect specific facts about certain profiles and so influence the nature and quantity of the follow up interview questions. For example, when looking for COI regarding military service in Syria, you will find that male citizens between the ages of 18 and 42 are obliged by law to perform their military service and mass conscription is common in Homs and Hama governorates. Even though university students may, under certain conditions, be exempted from military service, students over 25 years old were generally drafted into the army and other affiliated security bodies. If the applicant falls into this category, meaning that he was older than 25 in 2013, the information you discovered will have an impact on your approach to the material fact 'the applicant participated in the demonstrations in Homs as a university student'. Since the COI

indicates that the majority of students at his age were drafted into the army, you may want to include more targeted questions in order to find out how the applicant managed to avoid the military service. Due to the careful preparation, you will be also able to identify possible exclusion triggers and ask further specific questions. Further guidance on exclusion is provided in Section 4. Exclusion.

Having collected all the necessary COI and studied different types of reliable sources, you should be able to prepare a tailor-made interview plan (core topics, what kind of questions to ask), meeting the objectives of the individual interview. A well-developed interview plan is key for an effective and efficient interview.

Remember



3.2 Conducting the personal interview

Based on the information included in the file and the information you have collected, you will be able to ask **relevant questions** linked to external credibility or protection-related issues to be corroborated by the COI. You will also be able to easily identify new topics provided by the applicant during the interview. Below you can find illustrative and non-exhaustive examples of interview questions that are relevant for assessing the external credibility or the grounds of the claim or the future risk. Keep in mind that questions should always be adapted to the individual case and the COI at hand. At the same time, when formulating the questions, consider the applicant's individual circumstances such as their age, gender, educational and social background, etc ([27]). The information collected could be potentially corroborated by COI.

Where relevant, it is a good practice to ask the applicant during the interview to spell names, names of locations, names of organisations, etc. in the local language, which is helpful when doing one's own research or when asking COI experts for assistance.

([27]) This section deals with the information to be collected during the interview. For more detailed guidance on interview techniques, please see EASO, *Practical guide: personal interview*, December 2014.

Examples of external credibility questions in the Colombian case – exploring the applicant's statements

- What is the full name of the NGO you were working for (in the local language)?
- Could you describe the NGO you were working for? How is it structured?
- Where is its headquarter placed?
- Who is the founder/director/local director?
- What exactly does your NGO do, what are its objectives? What is its specialisation?
- What were your activities and responsibilities in the NGO? (This question is not linked directly to information that could be crosschecked with the COI, unless the person was high ranked. However, the COI might provide in general information on the responsibilities of the members depending their position in the organisation, so it can have effect on the external credibility assessment).
- Are you aware of the role and the activities of Las Águilas Negras? Could you describe them?

Examples of external credibility questions in the Syrian case – exploring the applicant's statements

- Could you describe the demonstration(s) in which you participated and your role in this (these) demonstration(s)? (Time and place)
- Could you describe what happened to you after you participated in this (these) demonstration(s)?
- Could you describe what happened to your family and friends; where are they now?
- Were you called up for military service? If so, when and how? Did you report for military duties?

Examples of protection-related questions in the Colombian case – exploring the future risk of the applicant (well-founded fear and the availability of protection)

- What is the situation of activists / social workers engaged in working for NGOs?
- How were you threatened by Las Águilas Negras? What about other employees/members of your NGO?
- Did you ask the local authorities for protection; for example, did you go to the police to report the threat? What was the result? Did they take any measure? If not, did you file a complaint at a different police station?

It is very important that during the interview you keep an **open mind** and stay **flexible** and **unbiased**. The interview plan you prepared and the COI you collected should only have a **supporting role** during the entire interview process. Anticipate and be ready that the applicant can raise completely new topics during the interview or you might receive unexpected answers.

Example in the Cameroon case

During the interview, the applicant from Cameroon states that he is married to a woman. This should not be automatically taken as a factor undermining his claimed homosexual orientation/behaviour. From the available COI reports, you can learn that it is not uncommon for homosexual men in Sub-Saharan Africa to lead a 'double life' and be married to women. He might have gotten married due to the prevailing social norms in his country and/or in order to protect himself ([28])

Keep in mind that COI has its limits and it can happen that specific information about some events is not available. However, this does not necessarily mean that a particular event did not occur or that a person or organisation mentioned by the applicant does not exist. Stay open-minded and during the interview collect **additional information** from the applicant that can help you to facilitate your research for further information after the interview.

Example in the Colombia case

The name of the NGO referred to by the applicant from Colombia does not appear in any available report on this country. This does not mean that the NGO does not exist and that the applicant's statement is not credible. You may not find information because the NGO is newly established, may have split from another organisation, or may be active at local level only and therefore there is not suc h an interest to publish related information ([29]). Ask the applicant to indicate other NGOs with similar aims and objectives and to provide you with information, in order to be able to look at the broader context.

New elements revealed by the applicant may require a quick check to confirm a location, a date or the name of a group, etc. In such cases, you may need to **search for additional information,** which can guide your questions. Notwithstanding, it is very important to **respect the flow of the interview**.

If you need to search for COI during the interview, you should make sure that this would **not disrupt** the rapport you have built with the applicant. Quick checks could be done in the applicant's presence, if the setting is appropriate. However, if you need more time to search for and familiarise yourself with a particular piece of COI, it may be more appropriate to do so during a **break** or **after** the interview.

([28]) Country Of Origin Information Unit Office For Foreigners, Poland, *Situation of Sexual Minorities in Africa(South of the Sahara)*, Maciej Fagasiński, May 2013, p. 23.

([29]) For more information on lack of COI see Section 3.3.1.1. Situations when assessing COI under the external credibility assessment.

Example 1 from the Syria case

During the interview, the applicant from Syria added that on his way to Hama he had stopped at Ar-Rastan. There he spent four months.

If you have the possibility you can quickly check **during the interview** the exact location of this place (e.g. using maps you can check if it is on the way to Hama) and pose additional questions about the applicant's stay in Ar-Rastan, or give the applicant the possibility to clarify some potential unclear elements (this will be discussed in more details below).

In practice, quick checks are possible only if you have access to a COI database or the internet. In this regard, follow the national practices.

Quick checks should be short and simple – they work best when checking names of places, locations of places, dates, names of organisations and abbreviations, names or nicknames of leaders, etc.

Example 2 from the Colombia case

During the interview, the applicant from Colombia adds the following new information. She claims that she has her own blog where she was strongly criticising the authorities for corruption and cooperation with drug gangs. She accused them of allowing criminal groups to recruit young boys. For this reason, she is threatened with imprisonment for slandering politicians.

In this situation, after checking the new facts provided by the applicant, such as the content of her blog, articles and comments about local politicians, you need to search for COI concerning the situation related to freedom of expression in Colombia and possible sanctions for slandering the authorities. You should also check available information on gang cooperation with the authorities or how the authorities are fighting this situation in any way.

Due to the quantity of new and specific information, in this case you will have to conduct deeper research and/or contact the COI unit. This would take you more time so it is recommended to do it **after the interview**.

In practice, deeper research and/or sending additional questions to your COI unit should generally be carried out after the interview.

Statements of applicants may differ from the COI you found, which could have a negative impact on the credibility and the final decision. COI that might make a decision-maker inclined to make a negative credibility assessment should be presented to the applicant for their response ([30]), in accordance with the principle of equality of arms. **The applicant should be, if possible, given the opportunity to explain contradictions with COI during the interview** ([31]), in order to challenge the information if they need to, and/or be prepared to deal with any information that might tend to negate the credibility of their claim.

Relying on your own experience and knowledge should be done with caution. Experienced case officers usually have a good overview of specific countries of origin. It is easier to **identify** relevant aspects and topics and, at the same time, the COI knowledge helps the experienced case officers to ask relevant questions. However, sometimes this experience could have a negative impact on the interview. Since experienced case officers are so comfortable with the topic, they might not check recent developments and there is a risk that their knowledge is outdated. For this reason, **you should not only rely on your experience** but remain **conscious of possible changes**.

Remember

1. Collect additional information
2. Be open and flexible
3. Respect the flow of the interview
4. Give the opportunity to the applicant to explain possible contradictions
5. Use your experience with caution

3.3 Assessing the application for international protection

At this stage of the procedure, COI will be used during the decision-making process, to support the assessment whether the applicant is in need of international protection.

As part of the **credibility assessment,** you should assess against the COI the relevant information and pieces of evidence collected and related to the material facts of the claim.

([30]) EASO, *Practical guide: personal interview*, December 2014.
([31]) EASO, *Practical Guide: Evidence assessment*, March 2015; EASO, *Practical guide: personal interview*, December 2014.

Material facts are facts that are directly linked to the definition of a refugee in accordance with Article 2(d) QD (recast) or of a person eligible for subsidiary protection (Article 2(f) and Article 15 QD (recast)) and go to the core of the application. Material facts concern:

- an applicant's country of origin;
- an applicant's past problems related to persecution or serious harm, and future fear;
- reasons why the applicant experienced/fears problems;
- reasons why the applicant is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of the country of origin, including the internal protection alternative;
- possible reasons why the applicant may be excluded.

Once you have completed the credibility assessment and determined which material facts are to be accepted, you will then use the COI in order to proceed with the **risk assessment**, to assess the likelihood of future persecution or real risk of serious harm.

Depending on the case, you may also have to use COI in order to assess the availability of **internal protection alternative** or **exclusion**.

For a full understanding of the evidence assessment methodology and a more detailed guidance on how to proceed with the credibility and the risk assessment, consult the *EASO Practical guide on evidence assessment*. Similarly, the *EASO Practical guide on qualification for international protection* and the *EASO Practical guide on exclusion* provide you with guidance on internal protection alternative and exclusion-related considerations. This practical guide focuses only on the use of COI at these stages.

Before proceeding with your assessment and your decision-making, you should pay attention to possible additional COI needs. You should go through COI related to the new information provided during the interview that you did not have the chance to crosscheck during the interview.

Example from the Colombia case

During the interview, the Colombian applicant mentioned new circumstances related to the international protection needs (Example 2 on p. 32). Consequently, you need to familiarise yourself with new topics, such as the situation regarding the freedom of expression in Colombia, possible sanctions for slandering the authorities, etc. You need to look for relevant COI before you start drafting the decision.

3.3.1 Credibility assessment

In this section, we will focus on assessing the evidence supporting each material fact of the case, the credibility assessment of each material fact and in particular the external credibility.

During the assessment of the statements and all other evidence, you have to ensure that the pieces of evidence under assessment are linked to each material fact, and assess each material fact according to the credibility indicators.

In your credibility assessment, you will proceed first with assessing the **internal credibility** of the applicant's statements against the relevant credibility indicators, i.e. sufficiency of details, specificity and consistency ([32]). You will then proceed with the assessment of **external credibility** of the statements and other pieces of evidence supporting the claim, by using COI and other evidence you may have collected. Finally, you will come to the conclusion taking into account both internal and external credibility. Keep in mind that it is not always necessary to search extensively for detailed COI. Before engaging in elaborate COI research or asking for assistance from a specialised COI unit, you should consider if the answer to the additional research question can be of such a nature as to change the assessment of a material fact. For example, if the applicant's statements on their participation in a demonstration are clearly not credible (serious contradictions and inconsistencies within the statements), would more detailed COI on what happened during the demonstration have the possibility to change the assessment of the overall credibility of this material fact as it has been thus far assessed?

During the external credibility assessment, you have to **validate the information** used from different sources against the COI quality standards. Validation of the information can be done by scrutinising the origin of the information provided by every source, and by cross-checking, corroborating and balancing the information with information from other sources. In most cases, it will be important not to rely on one source only, but to use multiple sources of different types, if possible at least three different sources, so as to create a balance of different perspectives.

The need to cross-check and corroborate information under the external credibility of the material facts depends on the nature of the information and the sources. The need is especially strong in the following cases.

- When it concerns a core matter in an application for international protection.
- When describing a major trend or a significant situation.
- When the information does not fulfil some of the COI quality criteria.
- When the information stems from anonymous sources. In practice, usually the other non-anonymous sources found for the purpose of cross-checking and collaboration will be referred to in the decision.

When validating and corroborating information, you should consider the following principles.

- When conducting own research, where possible, refer to the primary source or original source in order to avoid round tripping, false corroboration and misquoting of information.
    - Round tripping occurs when secondary sources cite each other instead of referring to the original/primary source. Failure to identify round tripping can lead to the use of information that may not be as current as it seems, or to the distortion of the information.

([32]) For a full understanding of evidence assessment methodology and a more detailed guidance on how to proceed with the credibility and the risk assessment, EASO, *Practical guide: evidence assessment,* March 2019, should be consulted.

- False corroboration occurs when a piece of information appears to be corroborated by information from different sources while in fact the information stems from the same primary/original source ([33]).
- Misquoting occurs when the initial information is repeated in a way that is not accurate.

When the primary/original source is a local media organisation, keep in mind the need to assess whether the country has an active and free press, as well as the possible presence of censorship or self-censorship.

Additionally, note that there may be a time lag between an event and the publication of information about the event. Particular sources have time-consuming clearing procedures or long publication cycles that cause delays, and so there is a difference between the reporting period and publishing date.

In case there are COI reports available that were issued by the national COI unit or by EASO, it will be useful to consider these first. This is because the authors have assessed the sources that were used in the report in line with the quality standards set out in Section 1.4 COI quality standards.

- The COI used in a decision should be as much as possible based on publicly accessible sources. Using public information directly serves the quality standard of transparency and traceability. Furthermore, it serves the standard of accuracy and currency by allowing others to scrutinise the information and contribute to corrections and amendments. If a confidential or anonymous source is used ([34]), the quality of the source has to be ascertained. The source needs to be assessed against quality criteria, which will allow for assigning the weight of the information in the decision. For example, you would need to evaluate the sources' operations/presence/roles in the relevant area, seriousness of investigations, reputation, etc. It is also important to weight, compare and corroborate the anonymous information in context of other COI. Relying on a single anonymous source should be avoided. Anonymous sources should be assessed depending on the extent to which they are consistent with other available COI. If anonymous sources are inconsistent with remaining information, exercise caution. Where conclusions are consistent with other COI, anonymous sources are given corroborative weight ([35]).

In order to validate the information, you should obtain **relevant, time-relevant and accurate** COI from reliable sources. COI should be as specific as possible and related to the situation that the applicant is referring to. However, information related to the broader perspective of the relevant context might also be useful depending the material fact that you are assessing. See the example below.

Example from the Colombia case

You are assessing the Colombian case and in particular the material fact that is related to the threats that the applicant faces because she was working in an NGO dealing with human rights. Under the external credibility of this material fact you should put in the decision information not only about the NGO in which the applicant worked, its activity

([33]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019.
([34]) For more information see Section 1.3. Important procedural concepts when using COI.
([35]) ECtHR, 28 June 2011, *Sufi and Elmi,* op. cit., fn. 5, para. 233.

and the treatment that its members are facing, but also information about the state of play of similar NGOs in Colombia. This would include the problems and obstacles they are facing, if their members are regularly targeted, whether they have government support or whether they are opposed by the government. This information could be enriched with information about the treatment that human rights defenders in general are facing in the country.

Remember that the **relevance and accuracy** of the COI to the case is more important than the quantity of COI collected. Refrain from referring to COI that is not related to the subject. There is no need to quote in your decision all COI reports you have collected during the procedure. Refer only to those that are relevant to the case.

Example from the Iraq case

Assessing the Iraqi case, you have at your disposal COI on the situation of Yazidis in Iraq. This includes the history of ISIS, including reports of international organisations on the abduction of young Yazidis by ISIS; reports from international organisations on the situation of single women in Iraq; and reports on security situation in Iraq.

When citing the COI in the external credibility of the material fact that is related to the presence and the behaviour of ISIS, this COI should be focused on the presence of ISIS in that area in 2014 and the behaviour towards civilians and in particular Yazidi persons, and more particular single Yazidi women with children. Information regarding recruitment of young Yazidi men by ISIS in that area in 2014 would not be relevant in this case. However, if this recruitment also concerned women, immediately this information would become relevant and crucial for this case. COI on the general security situation in Iraq could be useful to be cited as far as it could be relevant for the case in order to put specific information in context.

After identification of relevant COI, it is important to clearly state the link between the COI you provide and your argument.

3.3.1.1 Situations when assessing COI under the external credibility assessment

When using COI to assess material facts, **you can encounter the following situations**.

A. Corroborative COI

If reliable COI supports the applicant's statements or other evidence submitted, then the external credibility of a specific material fact can be considered established. This would not necessarily mean that the material fact would be accepted, since both internal and external credibility needs to be established.

Example from the Syria case

In the Syrian case, the applicant stated that he left his country because of the security situation and the compulsory army conscription, which is in line with the available COI.

See below the link between the COI and the material fact.

The applicant would be recruited into the army and forced to fight against his own people in a civil war. This is supported by several reports ([36]) stating that military service in Syria is universal and compulsory for men from 18 to 42 years old, or even up to 54 years old. Compulsory service lasts from 18 to 21 months. It is enforced by the state and the men who were recruited during the period that the applicant left were obliged to participate in the war.

B. Contradictory COI

- **COI contradicting the applicant's statements**

COI that clearly contradicts the claimed material facts is a negative external credibility factor. Where an inconsistency with COI is found during the interview, you should present this to the applicant to give them the opportunity to explain, as discussed in the section above. However, when inconsistencies between the applicant's statements and COI are discovered after the personal interview, you should only use such inconsistencies in your credibility findings with caution. Follow your national practice in case of post-interview inconsistencies between the applicant's statements and the COI. You may need to call the applicant for an additional interview, or you may need to notify the applicant about the opportunity to comment on the evidence gathered in the case and give additional explanations, or inform the applicant in another way. In the decision, when you use COI contradicting the applicant's statements and other evidence, the source assessment should be explicitly presented. At the same time, the material fact should be assessed properly. It is not sufficient to note that there is a contradiction between the statements and COI to reject a material fact as a whole. The contradiction needs to relate to the essence of the material fact and needs to be weighed with the other observed credibility indicators, both internal and external.

Example from the Colombia case of COI contradicting the applicant's statements

The applicant claimed that she has been working in a particular NGO for several years. In this regard, it can reasonably be expected from the applicant that she knows the organisational structure of the NGO. However, the information about the structure found in a variety of sources is different from the applicant's statements. This is a negative external credibility finding for the assessment of the relevant material fact, without meaning that the material fact will be rejected only based on this contradiction.

([36]) For example, relevant sources can be found here: EASO, *COI Report: Syria – Targeting of individuals*, March 2020.

- **Contradictory COI deriving from different sources**

If you found COI from different sources, one contradicting and the other corresponding with the applicant's statement, you should keep in mind that COI has to be approached in a neutral manner. One source cannot be prioritised because it would better fit your assessment to achieve a particular outcome or conclusion. In such a situation, you should start with a proper source assessment in order to identify, which source is more reliable. At the same time, you should try to find other sources on the subject. You should **approach the sources critically** by analysing answers on the source assessment questions: **who, what, why, how, when** ([37]). For example, do not forget to consider that authors usually focus on specific topics and so have a limited perspective. All abovementioned aspects have to be taken into account when weighing COI and credibility indicators. If the material fact remains uncertain, Article 4(5) QD (recast) (the principle of the benefit of the doubt) should be applied in order to reach a conclusion on whether or not such a fact is accepted. If the five criteria of Article 4(5) QD (recast) apply cumulatively, you must apply the benefit of the doubt and accept the material fact. However, your conclusions should be based on a reasonable balance of the criteria listed in Article 4(5), taking into account the individual and contextual circumstances of the applicant ([38]).

Example from the Syria case

The applicant from Syria stated that following the student demonstrations, the state authorities started arresting the participants. This information was supported by local NGO workers, however, it was contradicted in newspaper articles. After assessing the source you realise that the newspaper is supported by local authorities and so is clearly biased.

C. Lack of COI

In some cases, there will not be any available COI for assessing the asserted material facts. However, lack of COI does not necessarily mean that an event/person/issue did not or does not occur or exist. Lack of COI can be due, for instance, to limited access to information in the country of origin, or to the smaller scale and prominence of the event. Therefore, lack of COI should not in itself lead to a negative credibility finding, but has to be assessed properly. You should state under the external credibility of the material fact the lack of information by mentioning that you performed research and consulted publicly available sources but that you did not find any information. Subsequently, you should consider the application of the Article 4(5) QD (recast) (the principle of the benefit of the doubt ([39])).

([37]) For the source assessment, please see Section 1.5. The importance of source assessment.

([38]) For a more detailed analysis of the application of the benefit of the doubt, please consult the EASO, *Practical guide: evidence assessment,* March 2015.

([39]) Whenever an asserted material fact remains uncertain, Article 4(5) QD (recast), which relates to the principle of the benefit of the doubt, should be applied in order to reach a clearer conclusion on whether or not such a fact is accepted. If the five criteria of Article 4(5) QD (recast) apply cumulatively, you must apply the benefit of the doubt and accept the material fact. However, your conclusions should be based on a reasonable balance of the criteria listed in Article 4(5) QD (recast), taking into account the individual and contextual circumstances of the applicant. For a more detailed analysis of the application of the benefit of the doubt, please consult the EASO, *Practical guide: evidence assessment,* March 2015.

Example from the Colombia case

No information was found about the NGO where the applicant has been working. There could be many reasons for this, such as the fact that the NGO was newly established or only has a local presence. Your assessment will be based on the context and circumstances of the case as well as on the assessment of the other material facts. You should also search for information regarding the presence, the activities and the way other NGOs dealing with human rights in the country are treated.

D. Single primary source

If information is found from **only a single source**, the context of that source should be assessed, such as whether the country and/or the context is generally widely reported on or not; or whether the source in question is uniquely placed to document the information at hand.

You should state the fact that only one source could be found in your decision. The source should be briefly described and the context explained accounting for the above elements. Remember to do a proper source assessment when there are doubts about the reliability of the source ([40]).

Keep in mind that it is not necessary that every personal aspect of the claim is corroborated by relevant COI. COI is often not focused on the single applicant but on the general context and situation in the country. See an example on p. 40 (applicant from Colombia).

3.3.1.2 Assessment of documents

COI could also be consulted to assess relevant **documents** submitted by the applicant, in order to check if the specific type of document is issued in the country of origin or habitual residence of the applicant, and whether the issuing process was in accordance with COI. The content as well as the form of the document should also be consistent with COI. Compatibility with COI is one of the criteria that will help you in assessing documentary pieces of evidence provided by the applicant ([41]). A document issued contrary to the common practice of a particular country of origin would certainly give grounds for further explorations in terms of credibility assessment.

Some countries have specific databases with examples of existing documents from different countries. Check the availability of such databases in your country. Alternatively, you can consult the Public Register of Authentic travel and identity Documents Online (PRADO) ([42]).

([40]) EASO, *Country of Origin Information Report Methodology*, June 2019, p. 16.
([41]) For a more detailed guidance on how to assess documents, please consult EASO, *Practical guide: evidence assessment*, March 2015.
([42]) PRADO is a multilingual site with information on authentic identity and travel documents (also from third countries), organised by the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU (GSC). It includes information on the validity and on other

3.3.2 Risk assessment

Once the credibility assessment is complete, you will proceed with the risk assessment on the basis of all accepted material facts. Risk assessment is the forward-looking analysis to assess the need for international protection of the particular applicant. It looks into the future risk, i.e. the likelihood that future events would occur, based on the accepted facts ([43]) you have at hand at the time the decision is taken. The risk assessment analyses the future risk of the applicant based on the relevant standard of proof ([44]).

In the case that the future risk derives from incident(s) that took place or situation(s) that existed in the past, most of the COI might have already been used under the external credibility assessment of the material facts. You might need to highlight points from this information already provided in the external credibility assessment and/or provide additional information on the current situation that can be connected to the risk of the applicant in case they return to the country of origin. The amount and the content of this information depends on the current situation and how much this situation has changed since the applicant has left the country of origin.

Example from the Iraq case

The applicant fears for her life and the lives of her children because of the presence of ISIS in her area and the maltreatment of Yazidis and especially Yazidi women, taking into account that she is a single mother. Let us take the scenario that during the assessment of the material fact regarding the presence of ISIS and its behaviour against Yazidis and, in particular, single mothers, you have found COI confirming that these profiles were facing extreme danger in 2014 when the applicant left her country. When assessing the risk for the future, you need to check if these dangers are still present. Hence you need to find updated information about the situation. If the information confirms that the situation has not changed since 2014, then you need to connect the information regarding the past with the new findings and substantiate the future risk. However, if the new information indicates that the situation in the area has changed and that ISIS is no longer present, you may conclude that the applicant does not face this risk anymore. In that case, you will have to refer to all information that reflects a clear change in the situation in the area and make a distinction between the situation when the applicant left the country and the current one when assessing the future risk.

legal aspects, as well as technical descriptions (including descriptions of some of the most important security features) of these documents. For more information you can visit PRADO here.

([43]) Article 4(3)(a) QD (recast) states that 'all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin at the time of taking a decision on the application, including laws and regulations of the country of origin and the manner in which they are applied' are among the elements that have to be taken into consideration when assessing a claim.

([44]) Standard of proof refers to the threshold to be met to establish the degree of likelihood that a certain event may occur. The most commonly applied standard of proof in assessing the well-founded fear of persecution and the real risk of serious harm is 'reasonable degree of likelihood', explained in the EASO, *Practical guide on evidence assessment,* March 2015, p. 21.

In the next step, you should assess other relevant risks related to the individual characteristics and circumstances of the applicant. In this regard, you find information that shows that single mothers without any family networks face many dangers in society. These risks might not reach the same level of violence as in the past that were related to ISIS, however, you have to assess the risk for her and her children with regards to social treatment of similar profiles. On the other hand, if during her stay in your country the applicant married another applicant from the same area in Iraq and country, this will affect the information that you need to collect in order to assess the future risk. This is because in the event of return she will be a married woman with children. If the husband comes from another country, for example Somalia, then you have to search for information regarding the possibilities for Iraqi women to bring a foreign spouse to Iraq and to obtain a permanent residence permit for the spouse, as well as the treatment that interracial couples face in Iraq.

From the example above and the different scenarios, it is obvious that there might be future risks for the applicant that are not (only) related to past events occurred, but are connected to the changes in the country of origin and/or to the personal situation. You must therefore research and use the most recent relevant COI, considered in light of the individual characteristics and circumstances of the case, in order to assess if a future risk for the applicant exists.

Within the risk assessment, you also have to assess the possible availability of protection from the authorities in the applicant's country of origin or habitual residence, when the agent of persecution is a non-state actor. The COI can be crucial in order to identify if the state is able and willing to protect the applicant. When looking for information related to availability of protection by national authorities, you might come across different scenarios.

Example from the Colombia case

You might find information that the police rejects all the complaints against Las Águilas Negras or even that there are many members of the police who cooperate with the organisation. That clearly shows that the police tolerates or even supports the action of Las Águilas Negras. This information will help you to substantiate that the applicant cannot receive any protection if she returns to her country of origin because the authorities are not willing to protect her. Alternatively, the information about the reaction of the authorities might show that the police try to help people who ask for protection but there are no results because they do not have the power to contain Las Águilas Negras, due to the strong connections the organisation has with politicians. This information will help you to substantiate that the authorities are unable to provide protection to the applicant.

Up-to-date COI is also crucial when you assess risks related to serious harm and the **application of Article 15 QD (recast)**, in particular:

- the death penalty, for Article 15(a);
- the tortures or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, for Article 15(b);

and

- the nature of the conflict;
- the areas of the conflict; and
- the level of violence, for Article 15(c)

For this purpose, reports on the security situation in a country allow you to gather up-to-date and reliable information about the security situation.

3.3.3 Internal protection

After establishing protection needs, you may need to consider the availability of the IPA. In addition to all information you have already gathered up to this point, you will need to look for additional COI to assess the following.

A. The part of the country of origin considered for IPA is **safe** for the applicant. You will need to gather information about the security situation and the actors of persecution, the area of their influence and their ability to reach, trace and target the applicant in the potential IPA location. At the same time, you will need to look for information about actors of protection, the ability and the willingness of the actors of protection to provide effective and durable protection in the potential IPA location, e.g. information about the capability of the government and security forces to protect civilians and to secure and retain control over the considered IPA location, police presence, etc.

B. The applicant can safely and legally **access** the part of the country of origin considered for IPA. You will need information related to the travel itinerary to reach the IPA location from the country in which the application for international protection was lodged, possible legal restrictions and obstacles for entry and stay, possible risks on the way to the destination (e.g. checkpoints that will be encountered), etc.

C. The applicant can reasonably be expected to settle in the part of the country of origin considered for IPA. In this regard, basic needs should in particular be guaranteed, such as food security, shelter, hygiene, basic healthcare, and the opportunity to ensure subsistence ([45]). In this regard, you will sometimes need to find information about working opportunities, unemployment rate, poverty rate, availability of humanitarian aid, medical facilities, availability of accommodation and rental arrangements, services of sanitation, water supply, etc.

([45]) See EASO, *Practical Guide: Qualification for international protection,* April 2018.

During your research, do not forget to take into account the individual circumstances of the applicant, such as age, gender, family status, health condition, social and educational background, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. For example, you will need to look for information about the availability of specialised medical service, if the applicant has a specific health problem; about the working opportunities for a person belonging to a religious minority who might face discrimination; and information about the consequences of the absence of civil registration and documentation in relation to ensuring shelter or basic subsistence, etc.

Remember, in the assessment of IPA, the burden of proof shifts to the determining authority.

3.4 Reference in the decision

To ensure **transparency and traceability**, you should **refer** to and **cite COI in a clear manner** in your decision to enable readers to access the information, in accordance with the principle of **'equality of arms'** (see Section 1.3. Important procedural concepts when using COI). Every piece of information should be **traceable** to its source, as a minimum mentioning the author, title and date of publication, for example:

- Médecins Sans Frontières, *Set to Explode*, April 2017, p. 18.

For further guidance on source reference you can refer to the *EASO Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports* ([46]) or follow your national legislation and practices.

([46]) EASO, *Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports,* June 2019.

4. Exclusion

While the emphasis of this tool lies on inclusion-related topics, it is important to know that COI serves as an important function in detecting and examining exclusion cases as well.

The prompt detection of a possible exclusion case during the asylum procedure is essential. COI may support this process by signalling specific triggers (e.g. membership of a particular entity, type of activity or nature of act) and potentially excludable profiles that would need further examination. In addition, COI could provide background information about the general situation in a specific country of origin and the relevant actors responsible for the commission of excludable acts, including major human rights violations and abuses and serious crimes they commit.

Once a potential exclusion case has been detected, COI can assist the exclusion examination and more specifically the assessment of the credibility of the applicant's statements and of the exclusion-related facts.

In the context of evidence assessment for exclusion purposes, please keep in mind that the burden of proof is placed on the determining authority. This is with the exception of two situations where the burden of proof shifts from the state to the applicant as explained in the *EASO practical guide on exclusion* ([47]). The standard of proof ('serious reasons to consider') is higher than the one for risk assessment in examining the need of international protection ('reasonable degree of likelihood'). Therefore, the information that is used for excluding applicants for international protection has to be reliable and accurate to meet the standard of proof.

Often, information relevant for inclusion is also relevant for exclusion, in particular information on the actors of persecution and the acts of persecution. A common problem when researching COI on exclusion-related topics, however, is that some of the questions will be difficult to answer through researching publicly available sources, especially the more detailed questions. Hence, it is also important to have reasonable expectations on what COI can or cannot be found. Information about low-level officials, for example, is usually hard to come by. In addition, sometimes there will not be available COI to identify:

- whether any excludable acts took place;
- whether the applicants had a role in the commission of any of these excludable acts, and if so, their precise role/actions, the time and place that acts were committed;
- all the elements surrounding the circumstances negating individual responsibility or other relevant aspects.

This section provides a basic outline of the use of COI in potential exclusion cases. For a more in-depth introduction to the topic, refer to the EASO practical guide on exclusion ([48]).

([47]) See Chapter 5 in EASO, *Practical guide: exclusion,* January 2017.
([48]) EASO, *Practical guide: exclusion,* January 2017.

4.1 Identifying elements that trigger the need for exclusion examination

Indications of possible involvement in excludable acts may already occur during the registration phase and can come up at any time during the personal interview. To prepare for a scenario where exclusion becomes relevant during the interview, you need to have contextual knowledge of the country in question in order to be able to identify triggers. It is important to gather COI on topics such as whether there is armed conflict in the country or parts of the country, whether the country of origin has a repressive regime or whether there are armed or criminal groups present. It is also important to gather COI on any human rights violations, abuses and serious crimes the regime or armed groups are associated with, and whether there are links between the applicant and the profiles of the actors who are known to have been involved in excludable acts. Constructing timelines with the help of COI can be a helpful tool in exclusion cases. Such a COI timeline can be used to prepare for an interview, to assess if the person might have been involved in excludable acts at a particular time and in a particular place, or to ask for more information from the applicant about specific events. Next to the timelines, you should also pay attention to lists of profiles of actors who are known to have been involved in excludable acts as well as the indications that may alert you that the applicant might belong to one of the profiles listed. By preparing well for the interview, you will have the knowledge needed to ask the right questions. This may also give you information from the applicant that might facilitate further research.

Example from the Syria case

This is a young man coming from a country in a civil war where it is widely known that crimes against humanity, war crimes and other atrocities have been committed on a large scale by various actors. In addition, according to general information available, there are practices to forcibly recruit young men or they tend to join different armed groups involved in the conflict as from this they obtain financial support or other types of advantages. The applicant resided in an area (Homs) where violent demonstrations took place at the time when he lived there. These elements are indications that exclusion could become a relevant theme to explore.

Some topics of COI you can explore to prepare for the interview in this case are the following.

- What actors (military, armed groups, terrorist organisations, etc.) have been involved in the conflict in Syria at large?
- Which armed groups have been active in Homs, Hama and Sarmin during the time periods mentioned? What kind of organisations are those? What basic objectives do they have? What is their *modus operandi*? How do they recruit their members?
- Territorial control: which actor controlled the mentioned places and at what times?

- Who were the actors involved in the demonstrations that took place in Homs in 2013 and what human rights abuses, violations and serious crimes did they commit during this event?

By preparing ahead of the interview, you will be able to ask relevant follow-up questions and identify possible discrepancies between the applicant's story and the COI during the interview. If you identify such discrepancies or if there are gaps in the applicant's statement you need to give them the opportunity to explain them. If the applicant reveals, for instance, membership of an organisation or other circumstances that might be relevant, make sure to capture the applicant's narrative. Ask about facts that could possibly be corroborated or contradicted by COI after further research.

It is advisable to ask about facts that can be followed up on and note terms such as ranks and subdivisions in the applicant's language and get names of commanders higher up in the chain of command.

Example from the Syria case

Based on knowledge stemming from COI, questions that could be put to the applicant during the interview are listed below. These questions should begin with an open questions regarding applicant's life under the presence of al-Nusra Front and then become narrower when focusing on a specific topic.

1. How long have you lived in the Sarmin area?
2. Are you aware of who was in control of Sarmin, during your stay in the area?

The applicant answers that it was al-Nusra Front at the time.

3. How was your life under the presence of al-Nusra Front in the area?
4. Did you/your family encounter any problems with al-Nusra Front members while living in the Sarmin area?

The applicant replies that they tried to recruit him but he refused to join the group because he does not agree with their ideology. They have not approached him and he has not had any other issues with them after that event. His family members had no problems with al-Nusra Front. However, according to our information, al-Nusra Front engaged in forced recruitment and considered persons who refused to join to be adversaries at the time and they/their family members were targeted by violent acts. Moreover, the information states that the only way a fighting-age man could live in the Sarmin area at that time without encountering any problems with al-Nusra Front was by joining the group.

A follow up question could be:

5. How do you explain that in your case, al-Nusra Front did not take any measures against you or your family following your refusal to join them and you were able live there peacefully?

4.2 Further exploration of identified exclusion indicators

If indications of possible involvement in excludable acts arise during the interview you will have to conduct further COI research or contact your COI unit in order to explore and assess the exclusion indicators. If additional information is required, you may need to conduct a second interview focusing on exclusion, unless you refer the case to a dedicated national unit/expert dealing with exclusion cases. Referral to another unit or expert depends on the national practice and/or the particular circumstances of the case at hand.

At this phase, you should be able to narrow down relevant topics for further research.

Example from the Syria case

Let us, for illustrative purposes, say that the applicant admitted association with the al-Nusra Front. Some examples of topics that could be explored through COI are the following.

- What are the objectives of the al-Nusra Front?
- What are their recruitment methods?
- What kind of methods does the al-Nusra Front use when conducting warfare or engaging with civilians?
- Who does the al-Nusra Front target? Do they target civilians? By what methods and to what extent?
- Can the group and/or commanders of the group be tied to specific crimes or acts? When and where did those acts take place?
- Is the al-Nusra Front known under different names?

The nature of the organisation and command structure responsibility within the group is an important aspect that needs to be examined in exclusion cases. In order to determine whether an applicant might have incurred individual responsibility for excludable acts, or to understand if they may have been coerced or ordered to behave in a certain way, COI research can be directed towards information on this subject. COI can be helpful by providing contextual information about a group that can help to assess an applicant's level of individual responsibility (knowledge, intent, and actions) as well as possible plausibility of defences (duress or self-defence). This involves conducting COI research about the context of a group, how people join it, support or participate in activities or leave a group that has been involved in excludable acts. Some examples of relevant research questions relating to individual responsibility that could be formulated on this topic are described below.

Example from the Syria case

- What is the territorial command structure of the al-Nusra Front? For example, does each neighbourhood/village/district/province, etc., have its own branch and structure?
- Is there a central hierarchy that gives orders or do local-level commanders run things their own way?
- What is the hierarchical rank structure of the organisation?
- What are the responsibilities of an individual in each rank of the organisation?
- Does the group give orders to subordinate members to carry out specific crimes or operations?
- Who issues the orders and how are they given (e.g. by text, in person, in writing, etc.)?

In particular for the command responsibility, you would need to gather information about the role and the position of the applicant within the group, including whether he held a position as a commander. Some examples of relevant research questions relating to command individual responsibility that could be formulated on this topic are the following.

Example from the Syria case

- What crimes were committed by the group members.
- Who actually committed crimes (whether or not they were ordered)?
- What measures, if any, were taken to prevent any crimes from being committed and/or to ensure that such crimes would not occur again in the future?

Command responsibility is of course only one of the topics that are relevant in order to assess the **individual responsibility**. Further, COI can never serve as the sole evidence of individual responsibility. For more information, refer to the EASO practical guide on exclusion ([49]).

([49]) EASO, *Practical guide: exclusion,* January 2017.

5. COI research and COI sources

5.1 Different types of COI sources

Most of the information which you use for assessing the statements of an applicant and their need for international protection can be found in different types of sources such as books, internet sources and oral sources. Others classify sources according to the author or differentiate between general and specialised COI sources.

5.1.1 COI databases and portals

Databases and portals are not sources per se but provide access to sources and allow information to be retrieved. COI database/portals provide information that is highly relevant for assessing applications for international protection due to their scope and focus. Databases usually contain information from several different sources about different countries and topics. However, no database can be complete, and you should not rely exclusively on one database. At the same time, it is important to remember that the information you will find there has been preselected. COI portals apply the COI quality criteria to preselect the sources they provide on their platforms which may vary according to the sources involved, quality criteria, the scope of the topics and languages covered.

National COI databases. Many asylum authorities maintain their own COI databases that are internally or externally accessible. COI reports produced by various European COI units can be also generally found in the EASO COI Portal.

Examples of COI databases and portals

EASO COI portal. It mainly contains reports and query responses published by EASO and the COI departments of EU+ countries. Available at: https://coi.easo.europa.eu.

Ecoi.net. ACCORD's (the COI department of the Austrian Red Cross) COI database. The interface is available in English and German and most information available is in English. It is one of the largest COI databases available and it contains information from a wide range of sources and from a wide range of languages. Available at: www.ecoi.net.

Refworld: Database operated by UNHCR that contains COI published until December 2018. In January 2019 UNHCR initiated a partnership with ACCORD and endorsed ecoi.net as the main COI database. Refworld's new focus is on policy, case-law from national, regional and international courts and tribunals, and national legislation. Available at: www.refworld.org.

ReliefWeb: Database operated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Unlike the previously listed databases, ReliefWeb is not primarily intended to serve as a COI database. It is mainly intended to support humanitarian aid actors, but is frequently updated with reports from bodies, for example UN agencies, that may be of use in COI research. It also contains maps and other useful infographics. Available at: https://reliefweb.int.

Please remember that every source has its mandate and/or mission and that there is no general hierarchy of sources. The usefulness and authority of each source depends on the question you need to answer – each source should be assessed in its own right, and conclusions on the reliability of the source should only be drawn after a thorough source assessment has been conducted.

Depending on your research question, some types of sources are usually more appropriate than others. They also have some inherent pros and cons.

5.1.2 General COI sources versus specialised COI sources

General COI sources provide general information about countries of origin and can result in a good overview of the country situation. However, if you need more in-depth knowledge on a certain topic, you may need to consult specialised sources as they may have a regional or national focus or a specific thematic focus. Examples of specialised sources that have a thematic mandate are The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, an international NGO focusing on LGBTI issues; and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, an international NGO focusing on the situation of internally displaced persons.

The UN has several specialised agencies that provide reports on various topics. Some examples are the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights that focus on humanitarian aspects and human rights, respectively. Examples of specialised sources with a regional mandate are the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), focusing on the Americas, and Afghanistan Analysts Network, a research organisation focused on Afghanistan. In the case of IACHR, it also has a thematic mandate, focusing on human rights. This is not uncommon, for example, many UN agencies have regional branches with a specific regional mandate and their own websites. The UN also have special missions to some countries. These missions often produce a lot of country specific information. Examples of countries that currently have UN missions are Afghanistan and Somalia. They tend to report on various human rights related issues.

The types of sources most commonly used can be classified as follows

- **International and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs)**

These organisations, such as UNHCR, UN Security Council, European and EU institutions such as Council of Europe, European Parliament, EASO, African Union and Economic Community of West African States, publish periodic reports, position papers on certain specific situations, findings of special rapporteurs or human rights experts, election observers' reports and position papers on many countries of origin, background information and much more for many countries of origin.

These sources have the advantage of an international or regional mandate that creates a basis for expertise and gives them access to information on particular human rights practices. Nevertheless, some of them may be prevented from carrying out first-hand investigations immediately, or may not be allowed to enter a country or region at all. Often such bodies gather information on a confidential basis. Be mindful of whether a document is produced by a political body (composed of government delegates) or by a monitoring body (composed of experts and independent members), as this may affect the accuracy and reliability of the information. IGOs are usually good sources when researching human rights issues and the like.

Examples of IGOs ([50])

Council of Europe. Available at: http://www.coe.org.

In particular, reports by the Commissioner for Human Rights, available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner; reports by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/home; and reports by Action against Trafficking in Human Beings https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking.

EASO. COI reports on various countries of origin. Available at: https://www.easo.europa.eu/information-analysis/country-origin-information/country-reports.

Human Rights Council. For example, annual reports and resolutions. Available at: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/Documents.aspx

United Nations Peace Operations. Information about UN peacekeeping missions. Available at: http://www.unmissions.org

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: analytical policy papers on humanitarian data and trends as well as thematic publications providing information on important humanitarian issues, e.g. protection of civilians and humanitarian access. Available at: http://www.unocha.org

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: publications on a variety of topics related to human rights. Available at: https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/security-council-documents

The UN Security Council: contains reports of the Secretary-General, annual reports, reports of Security Council Missions, etc. Available at https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/security-council-documents

UN Journal, documents from the General Assembly, Security Council, Human Rights Council, Economic and Social Council, etc. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/sections/general/documents/index.html

Unicef: a source of information on the situation of children around the world, publishing statistical data and publications on various topics. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/

United Nations Development Programme: publishing annual reports. Available at: http://www.undp.org

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: provides digital library with publications on topics related to gender equality and the empowerment of women, as well as annual, monitoring and progress reports. Available at: http://www.unwomen.org/en

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: publishing statistical data and news related to refugees, forced displacement, statelessness and other related topics. Available at: http://www.unhcr.org

([50]) EASO, *Judicial practical guide on country of origin information*, 2018, p. 38.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East: a relief and human development agency, publishing reports on different topics related to Palestine. Available at: http://www.unrwa.org

United Nations Secretary-General: includes database of documents and publications, reports, including reports about the situation in countries of origin, letters and notes verbales, treaties and agreements, draft resolutions and decisions. Available at: http://www.un.org/sg

- **Governmental and state sources**

Various state institutions publish different types of COI products on the situation in many different countries of origin. Some of these institutions publish a mixture of policy and COI material. In particular, some institutions also provide query responses and fact-finding mission reports.

If you want to assess a governmental source, note whether it is the government of the country concerned, or whether it is a foreign government. Take into consideration the human rights record of that government, the relationship between the states concerned, and other policy considerations that may impact upon the quality and reliability of the information. The state of the country of origin can be a good source on topics such as national laws or the issuance of identity documents, but may be biased on matters such as human rights.

Examples of governmental and state sources ([51])

EU+ countries (COI products can be accessed from the EASO COI Portal)

- Denmark: the Immigration Service's Country of Origin Information Division.
- France: the Division of Information, Documentation and Research of the French Office for Refugees and Stateless Persons and the Centre for Research and Documentation of the National Court of Asylum.
- Germany: the Country of Origin (COI) Information System of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees – MILo.
- Netherlands: the Ambtsberichten.
- Norway: the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre – Landinfo.
- Sweden: the Swedish Migration Agency.

Others (COI products can be accessed from ecoi.net)

- Canada: the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.
- United Kingdom: the Home Office – Country policy and information notes.
- United States: the Department of State.

([51]) EASO, *Judicial practical guide on country of origin information*, 2018, p. 38.

- **Non-governmental sources**

Some internationally operating NGOs publish reports and papers on certain specific situations for many countries of origin (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch). Other NGOs operate on a national or local level and publish reports on specific situations in their own country (e.g. the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, the Girls Power Initiative in Benin City). Some NGOs (such as the Swiss Refugee Council) provide publicly available query responses and reports on fact-finding missions.

The reliability and accuracy of reports by NGOs will entirely depend on their methodology for gathering information, just as is the case for large human rights NGOs that advocate for respect for human rights more broadly. NGOs representing the interests of a particular group – ethnic, religious or gender – can sometimes be more difficult to assess and may contain information coloured by their particular focus or mandate. These may be less reliable than NGOs that report widely and extensively on a number of human rights issues and regions, so it is worthwhile to assess such sources carefully. While taking into account that it can sometimes be hard to assess the reliability, this type of source is sometimes highly specialised in topics that might not be well covered by other sources.

Examples of non-governmental sources

Atlas of Torture. A project by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights, this website provides an overview of the situation of torture and ill treatment around the world. Available at: https://www.atlas-of-torture.org/

Amnesty International. Provides documents on particular countries. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/

Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index. Provides reports on the development of democracy, economy and politics in developing and transformation countries. Available at: https://www.bti-project.org/en/home/

Freedom House. Provides periodic reports on political rights and liberties, on nations in transition and on other special subject matters. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/reports

Human Rights Watch. Provides reports on various subject matters. Available at: http://www.hrw.org/publications

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Focuses on internal displacement and provides country profiles, global reports and a database on the subject. Available at: http://www.internal-displacement.org/

International Crisis Group. Produces detailed analyses and policy advice relating to conflicts and potential conflict situations around the world. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/latest-updates/reports-and-briefings

International Federation for Human Rights. Comprises 184 organisations from 112 countries and denounces human rights violations. Available at: http://www.fidh.org/en/

International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. Provides information on the legal and societal situation of LGBTI persons in many countries. Available at: https://ilga.org/

Reporters Without Borders. This is an independent NGO with consultative status in the United Nations, Unesco, the Council of Europe and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. They issue press releases and reports about the state of freedom of information throughout the world and how it is being violated. Available at: https://rsf.org/en

Swiss Refugee Council. This Swiss NGO publishes thematic COI reports, mainly in German and French. Available at: https://www.refugeecouncil.ch/publications/country-of-origin-reports

World Organisation Against Torture. Publishes reports focusing on the situation of human rights defenders and, jointly with the International Federation for Human Rights, the annual report of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. Available at: https://www.omct.org/

- **Media sources**

Media sources can be among the most important sources for daily updates on situations in countries of origin, specific events, and timelines. International and national media sources (e.g. international media companies like the BBC, Reuters, Agence France Presse, Al Jazeera) often publish daily news information on countries of origin. Media sources can be useful when conducting research on very specific or localised events or to get chronological overview of events.

Most international media sources typically follow rigorous methodological and professional editorial guidelines for reporting. However, they may not always provide local level detail.

Local media sources often have more information about local events, but their reliability might be harder to assess and they may not have rigorous methodologies and need to be assessed carefully. Note also that media sources are sometimes state-owned (e.g. Xinhua, TASS) or have obvious or covert links to political parties or actors in a conflict, and therefore always need to be thoroughly assessed. Sometimes actors in the conflict may also control their own news agency (Voice of Jihad of the Taliban, ISIS, etc.). These should especially be read with caution and always compared with reporting from others.

Examples of media sources

For links to local media see the country profiles provided by the BBC, with media outlets listed and linked where possible.

- **Legislative and administrative bodies (in countries of origin)**

These could include parliaments or ministries in countries of origin. They produce and publish the text of national laws and regulations, such as the penal code or the nationality laws, which can be useful when conducting COI research.

- **Think tanks and academic sources**

These are sources connected to think tanks, universities or colleges, and they produce analytical and research reports relating to their specific fields of interest and expertise. However, the access might be restricted to some publications.

Scrutiny and care are needed when using 'open access' academic articles available on the internet, as the methodology employed may not always be high quality. Always assess the individual author's reputability and the methodologies employed.

Examples of academic sources

Chatham House. A policy institute, also known as the Royal Institute of International Affairs, analyses the major international issues and current affairs as well as global, regional and country-specific challenges and opportunities. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/

International Crisis Group. A think tank performing research and analysis on global crises. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/

London School of Economics. A social science university, conducting research on various topics. Available at: http://www.lse.ac.uk/

- **Social media**

Social media are usually web platforms for user-generated content. They merely provide access to publications, articles, comments or visual material produced by a variety of people and institutions. Examples of social media include social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn); weblogs; microblogs (Twitter); wikis (Wikipedia); file sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr); location-based services (e.g. Panoramio, Wikimapia); etc. Social media allows a growing number of people to quickly and easily document events and to communicate this information around the world instantly. Social media can be helpful when searching for latest developments in a country of origin that is experiencing a state of upheaval, curtailment of freedom of expression and when following developments on a certain topic.

Content available on social media accounts is most often not submitted to the same research rigour and editorial process as established media or other sources. Therefore, the risk may be higher that content is inaccurate, biased, intentionally misleading, or dubious. Additionally, their content is often user-generated and because of the speed of the communication or content, particular care must be taken to ensure that any source on social media is properly assessed as described in Section 1.5. The importance of source assessment. The identification of the source reporting via social media accounts requires particular attention. Cross-checking of information found via social media accounts is therefore very important.

- **Non-IT-based sources**

Non-IT-based sources such as hardback books, magazines and maps also represent very important sources of information. Documents from interviews, conferences and seminars are also an important source of information.

5.2 Practical tips for basic COI research by case officers

By now, you should be acquainted with identifying relevant COI topics and formulating research questions. You have also familiarised yourself with source assessment and quality standards. While these constitute the core aspects of conducting COI research, there are also some practical hints to consider. Usually, the first step is searching for information using COI databases, portals and search engines ([52]).

When searching in databases, it is important to get acquainted with the particularities of that database. One of the most important aspects to consider is the content of the database. What criteria is applied when selecting reports or documents to publish? From which sources is content typically provided? The database websites usually have an 'about' section where this type of useful information is provided.

When searching for information, it is important to choose your search terms wisely. Think of synonyms or related terms of the search term you are using and it might yield more results. Remember that words deemed as insensitive or inappropriate in your country might not be perceived as such in other countries or settings.

If looking for information about e.g. *forced marriage*, you could also do a search with the term *coerced marriage* (synonym), *arranged marriage* (related term) or early pregnancy (connected theme). Another tip is using the verb form of the search term, in this case *forcibly married* ([53]). In most cases, these methods will yield more results than when you limit yourself to only the first search term you think of.

Sometimes you will use search terms in another language than your own or English, for example, a term in the language spoken in the country of origin you are doing research on. This can sometimes be tricky, especially with languages that use another alphabet other than Latin script. It is not uncommon for words to be transcribed with various spellings. Take the group *Yazidis,* for example. Some other variations of the spelling of the group include *Yezidis* and *Izadis.* Sometimes, a term is known both in the local language and translated to English (or other languages). This is common when researching groups or organisations. Take the Colombian paramilitary organisation Las Águilas Negras, for example. It is sometimes translated as *the Black Eagles.* Searching with both these terms might lead to better search results.

A useful tool when searching using e.g. synonyms or alternative spellings, is using *search operators.* There are several different search operators and different databases and search engines use slightly different operators (another good reason to look at the 'about' section at the database website). Some of the most common **search operators** are found below.

([52]) For more information see Section 5.1. Different types of COI sources.
([53]) ACCORD, *Researching country of origin information Training Manual*, 2013 edition, p. 115.

AND operator

The AND operator is used to combine two or more words. If you write AND between two words, the search will result in all documents that include both those words (but not documents that only contain one of the words). Example: A search for *Yazidi* AND *Sinjar* will yield results where both *Yazidi* and *Sinjar* are mentioned.

OR operator

The OR operator will list documents that contain one or more words combined by the operator. Example: A search for *Yazidi* OR *Sinjar* will yield results where one or both of the words *Yazidi* and *Sinjar* are mentioned.

NOT operator

The NOT operator is used to exclude words. Example: A search for *Congo* NOT *Brazzaville* will yield results where the word *Congo* is mentioned but exclude all results where *Congo* and *Brazzaville* is mentioned.

Phrase search

You can search for a phrase, a proper name or a set of words in a specific order by putting them in double quotes. A query with terms in quotes finds pages containing the exact quoted phrase. Example: A search for '*human rights*' finds documents containing the phrase *human rights*, while *human rights* without the quotation marks would find documents containing the word *human* and the word *rights* without them necessarily being together in a phrase.

Wildcards and truncation

Wildcards are symbols that can be used to replace one or several characters within a word, or one or several words within a phrase. Wildcards can be used for words with spelling variations, in particular with names transcribed from languages with non-Latin alphabets. One of the most commonly used wildcards is the asterisk (*). Some search engines use a question mark (?) to replace a single character in a word. Example: A search for *LGBT** will yield results where terms such as *LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI* and *LGBTQ+* are mentioned. A search for *Y?zidi* will yield results where e.g. the terms *Yazidi* and *Yezidi* are mentioned.

Fuzzy search

Fuzzy searches help to find words that are spelled similarly to your search term. This feature is useful if you do not know the exact spelling of a word, or if there are too many spelling variations to capture by using wildcards. A common sign for this function is ~. Example: A search for *Yazidi~* could yield search results with documents containing other spellings of the word such as *Yezidi*. Besides abstraction of the vowels, fuzzy search also applies for doubling of consonants (Mohammed or Mohamed) or consonants that sound alike (Mohammet or Mahammed).

These search operators and functions can usually be combined in a number of ways. If you are, for example, researching ISIS activity in the Sinjar/Mosul area you could write the following in the search form: *(Sinjar OR Mosul) AND (ISIS OR ISIL OR 'Islamic state' OR DAESH).*

Note that these functions can differ between different databases. Some signs might be different. The NOT operator, for example, can sometimes be replaced by a minus sign (–).

The use of search operators is a great way to widen or narrow your search depending on your information needs. For more in-depth information on research strategies see *ACCORD Researching Country of Origin Information: Training Manual* ([54]), or look at the search instructions in the respective databases.

([54]) ACCORD, *Researching country of origin information Training Manual*, 2013 edition.

Annex. Checklist

Checklist
Preparing for the personal interview ☐ Did I consult COI to prepare for the interview? Did I consult COI to get a general overview/ update of the current security, human rights and political situation in the country of origin? ☐ Did I consult COI to identify elements to be clarified?
Conducting the personal interview ☐ If before or during the interview I found COI which contradicts or questions the applicant's statements, did I give an **opportunity** to the applicant to explain these findings during the interview? ☐ If appropriate, did I **consult COI during the interview** to check facts or obtain additional information? ☐ If I was in **doubt** regarding the nationality or country of origin of the applicant, did I use COI to assess the applicant's statements in this regard?
Assessing the application for international protection ☐ Did I make sure to use **relevant** and **time-relevant** COI to assess the credibility of material facts? ☐ Did I make sure to use **relevant** and **current** COI for the risk assessment? ☐ Did I make sure to use **relevant** and **current** COI for assessing the availability of IPA (if applicable)? ☐ Did I use **relevant** COI to assess exclusion (if applicable)? ☐ In my reasoning, did I make sure to **clearly state the link** between the COI and my argument? ☐ Did I **reference each piece of COI** properly in my reasoning? ☐ Did I make sure to use COI, when possible, from **at least three sources**? ☐ Did I check **the objectivity and reliability of the source** before selecting this source? ☐ Did I make sure to use **balanced mix of sources**? ☐ If I could not find COI, and if my office has a COI unit, did I **contact my COI colleagues** to ask for support? ☐ In case of lack of relevant COI, did I properly **assess this in my reasoning**?
Practical tips for COI research ☐ Did I consult the most widely used COI databases/portals? ☐ Did I use alternative spellings, synonyms and related terms when searching for information?

Getting in touch with the EU

In person
All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct information centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you at: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

On the phone or by email
Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:
— by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
— at the following standard number: +32 22999696 or
— by email via: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

Finding information about the EU

Online
Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

EU publications
You can download or order free and priced EU publications at: https://publications.europa.eu/en/publications. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en).

EU law and related documents
For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu

Open data from the EU
The EU Open Data Portal (http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.

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