



JULY 2020

How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed Into a Regional Powder Keg

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Cover photo: Mohamed Azakir / World Bank.



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

+ CONTENTS

Summary	1
A Note on Methodology	3
Introduction	3
The Return of Syrian Regime Forces to the South	5
The Aftermath: The Regime's Battle for Control	8
From a Border Area to a Zone of Regional Contention	14
Conclusion	17
About the Author	18
Acknowledgments	18
Notes	19

Summary

Syria's conflict has transformed the country's southern border region into a zone of regional contention. The status quo there, largely forged and maintained by Russia since 2018, aims to prevent expanded control by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian and pro-Iranian military forces, which could trigger a regional confrontation. The south will remain a volatile area, probably for years, and its fate will be affected by regional politics, not the government's will.

Key Themes

- The location of Daraa and Quneitra Governorates in southern Syria near the boundaries with Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights strongly influenced the way the Assad regime forces returned there in 2018.
- Israel and Jordan feared that a regime return to the south would facilitate the deployment of Iranian and Iranian proxy forces near territories they control.
- To prevent Israel, Jordan, and other actors from obstructing a regime return, Russia organized a strategy that excluded Iran's participation and facilitated relative dialogue, soft power, and compromise.
- The nature of the Russian-led process prevented the full restoration of the regime's full authority in parts of the south, replacing the situation of open rebellion there with one of low-intensity conflict.
- The dynamics in the border region have taken on regional implications, so that whatever occurs there could have repercussions further afield.

Findings

- The status quo in southern Syria, despite its shortcomings, has thus far prevented a dangerous regional escalation, making its continuation desirable.
- Despite Russia's efforts to limit an Iranian return to the south, its latitude to enforce this is limited. There are signs that pro-Iranian military and security units of the Syrian army are looking for ways to expand their presence in the south.

- Local politics in Daraa Governorate are inextricably linked to regional considerations and foreign actors. The fate of former opposition figures is tied to Russia's commitment to the region, of which they should be wary.
- To compensate for its limited authority in recaptured areas of the south, the regime has sought to revive the role of the state as a provider of goods and services in exchange for loyalty. The state's limited resources hampers this, however.
- For now, Iran does not appear to want to undermine the status quo in the south. However, it is unlikely to be happy with the constraints placed on its actions, which feed into its ties with Russia on shaping outcomes in Syria. This leaves open the possibility that Iran may one day challenge the present situation, heightening prospects for a regional confrontation.

A Note on Methodology

Because the security situation in southern Syria prevented the author from undertaking field work, this paper is primarily based on thirty-five interviews conducted remotely or during author's three field studies in Jordan in October 2019, December 2019, and March 2020. Most of the interlocutors were Syrians living in Jordan and in southern Syria, but several were Jordanians, foreign diplomats, or experts specialized in issues this paper examined. Triangulation was used to correlate firsthand accounts with open source data when possible.

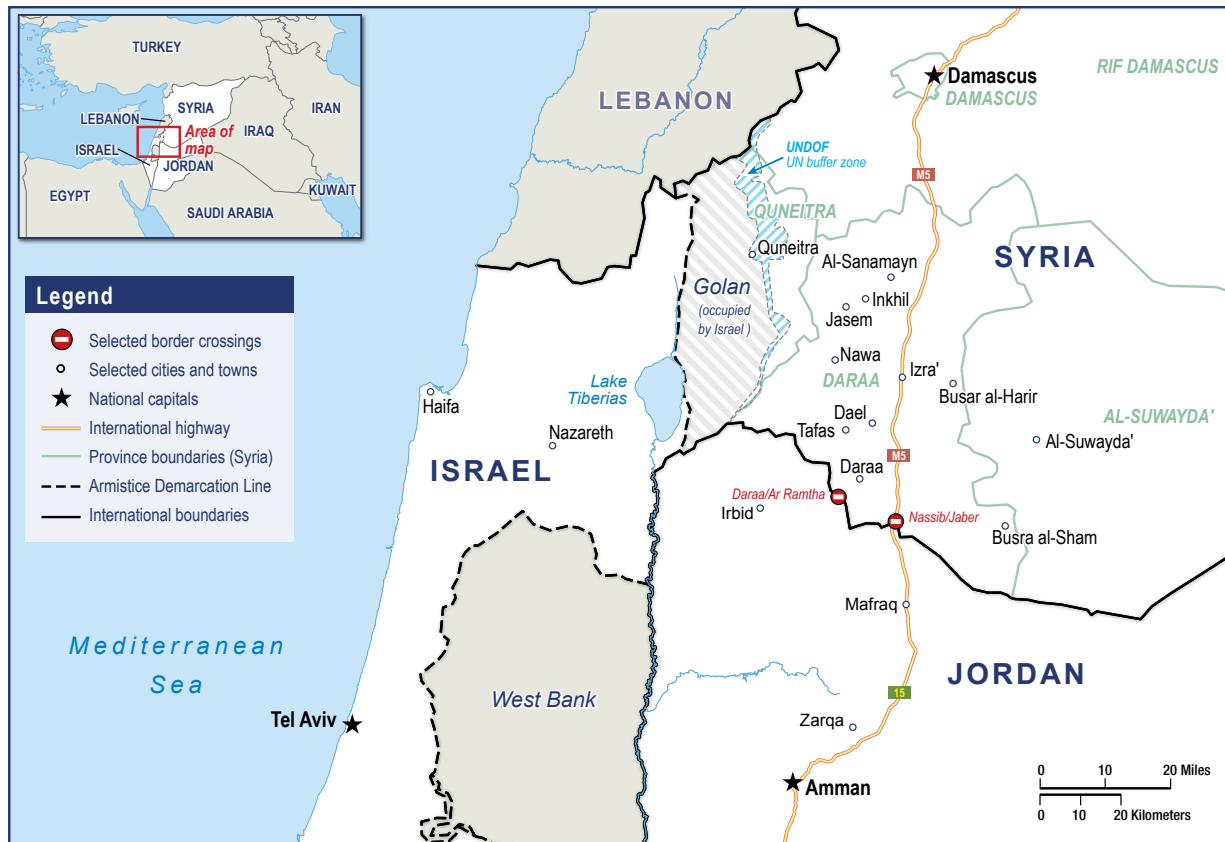
Introduction

The conflict in Syria has transformed country's southern border region into a zone of regional contention. Both the ceasefire line that separates Syria from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and the border between Syria and Jordan have taken on new meaning during the conflict. They represent the contours of a volatile and peripheral region that gained centrality after the Syrian uprising in 2011 because of the involvement of domestic, regional, and international actors in shaping political outcomes there. This complex reality determined the way President Bashar al-Assad's regime, backed by Russia, undertook its military return to the south in 2018. By proceeding carefully because of the regional ramifications of such a move, the regime and Russia created a situation that has left government control over the south tentative while failing to resolve regional power plays.

Syria's uprising began in the southern Daraa Governorate in March 2011 (see map 1). Throughout the country an initially nonviolent movement was met with force by the regime and was gradually transformed into a militarized rebellion that drew in foreign actors. In 2015 Russia intervened militarily and turned the tide in favor of the regime. Between 2016 and 2018, Assad's forces, with Russian air cover and in many cases backed by Iran and pro-Iranian forces, reclaimed dozens of opposition-held areas, including the southern governorates of Daraa and Quneitra.

Because Daraa and Quneitra are part of a sensitive region near the occupied Golan Heights and Jordan, a different strategy of return there was necessary. Israel's main concern was that the return of regime forces would be accompanied by a major deployment of Iranian forces and their proxies near the Golan, which could lead to the opening of a new front against Israel. This concern was shared by the United States, which since 2013 had been part of a joint operations room in Jordan that supported Syrian opposition groups. Russia and the Assad regime realized that Israel, the United States, and Jordan had the means to jeopardize the return of Syria's military. So, Russia pushed for a strategy that would exclude the participation of Iran or its proxies in the battle for the south and that would facilitate the return of regime forces by emphasizing dialogue, soft power, and compromise, which had not been the approach in other regions.

Syria's Southern Border Region



This tactic led to weak regime control over the south, especially in Daraa Governorate. Instead of helping the regime reimpose its military and security order, Russia's negotiated pacification agreement that preserved a role for some of the rebel groups and civilian opposition. That is why Damascus has been struggling to restore its sovereignty over the border region ever since its forces' return. On one level it has been engaged in a low-intensity conflict with the remnants of the armed opposition that have strongly resisted the regime's return. On another, Damascus has sought to reestablish its authority by attempting to revive its previous role as a provider of goods and services, though these efforts have been seriously impeded because of Syria's deteriorating economy.

The strategic impose of the south, the regime's inability to reimpose its full sovereignty over the area, and the involvement of new actors such as Iran and Russia have granted this formerly peripheral region, where the interests of multiple actors now converge and conflict, a crucial role in regional affairs. This makes for a volatile situation that affirms how extensively Syria's south has changed since 2011.

The Return of Syrian Regime Forces to the South

The military offensive in the south by regime forces backed by Russia began in June 2018 and was over by early August. These forces began by targeting northeastern parts of Daraa Governorate and soon recaptured the area before marching toward the border with Jordan.¹ By the end of the campaign there were different degrees of control exerted by the Assad regime in the region. This was the result of two parallel processes of return—one led by Russia, the other by the regime.

During the military advance, Russian-led negotiations between regime and opposition representatives were convened in Busra al-Sham, in the Daraa Governorate. Involving more dialogue and compromise, this process resulted in the establishment of zones where the presence of the regime's security services was weak to nonexistent. The regime track aimed at securing surrender deals from rebels and allowed for the imposition of a stronger security presence.

Before the military offensive as well as in the initial phases of the negotiation process in Busra al-Sham, Russia sought to apply its relatively milder approach to all of Daraa and Quneitra Governorates.² However, negotiations with the rebels took place in the context of a constantly shifting situation on the ground. What ensued was a more complicated map with three types of areas. The first included Busra al-Sham, parts of Daraa City that were under rebel control (known as Daraa al-Balad), and Tafas, as well as some areas surrounding the cities. These areas were characterized by a return of state institutions, but not of the Syrian army and security services. Russia remained committed to the agreement with the rebels in these areas. In a second area, covering Daraa's northwestern rural areas, the Russian and regime track worked simultaneously, which allowed for a return of the regime's military and security forces, even if their control was not absolute. And in a third area, where the regime recaptured territory itself, it was able to assert firmer security control.³

An opposition group in Busra al-Sham known as Quwwat Shabab al-Sunna (Sunni Youth Forces), under the command of Ahmad al-Audeh, was the first to accept Russia's terms in early July 2018. Other rebels, including those stationed in Daraa City and Tafas, and some civilian representatives who participated in the negotiations, initially resisted the deal, calling it "humiliating."⁴ However, each time they left the negotiating table, Russia and the regime escalated their attacks against them and managed to recapture new areas.⁵ Eventually, the rebels and civilian opposition representatives submitted to Russia's terms.

One of the most important aspects of the settlement in Busra al-Sham, Daraa City, and Tafas is that the regime's security forces and military units, stationed outside these localities, could not carry out major operations, such as arrests, within their boundaries. However, it did permit the return of the

state's civilian and governing institutions, such as municipal councils. Based on the settlement, and thanks to Russia's facilitation, members of rebel groups also received a security clearance. For example, Audeh joined the Syrian Army's Russian-sponsored Fifth Corps and became the commander of its Eighth Brigade, the backbone of which was made up of his rebel comrades.⁶ While nominally part of the Syrian military, the rebels-turned-soldiers remained at odds with the regime and in charge of local security affairs in Busra al-Sham and surrounding areas that had been included in the deal. Audeh became Russia's man in the south.

In Daraa City, too, former rebel groups resolved their security issues with the regime through Russia's facilitation. They remain in charge of the area encompassed by the agreement, still carry their light weapons, and most have no affiliation with any of the regime's security or military institutions.⁷

The situation was more complex in Tafas. There, many former rebels resolved their security issues and joined regime military or security bodies, notably the Military Intelligence Directorate. This enabled them to continue carrying their light weapons and to remain in their localities.⁸ While they were nominally reintegrated into the regime's military and security apparatus, they still retained their solidarity to their rebel group. As one local who still lives in Tafas noted:

After the settlement, the guys [rebels] started in their new jobs in the Fourth Division, Military Intelligence, and so on. However, their loyalty was still with their [rebel] armed faction. When there was a regime threat [for example an attempt to arrest someone], they gathered in their towns to fight.⁹

By mid-July 2018, Russia and the regime had neutralized eastern Daraa Governorate, Daraa City, and most of the areas along the border with Jordan by force or through negotiated agreements. They subsequently advanced to recapture the remaining parts of northwestern Daraa and its rural areas. There, too, Russia brokered agreements in a few localities. The towns of Nawa and Jasem entered into an agreement with the regime with Russian guarantees. These were more onerous than the one covering Busra al-Sham, Daraa City, and Tafas, because regime forces were in the process of retaking areas while the negotiations were taking place. The military and security forces were allowed back but they still face continued resistance during security operations.¹⁰ Russia occasionally involves itself in local matters such as resolving problems that arise because of arbitrary arrests or managing tensions between regime forces and former opposition groups.

Military operations in the south ended in the early days of August 2018 when regime forces took control of Quneitra Governorate. This was followed by the only major evacuation in the south, when some 10,000 rebels, their families, and other civilians left for Idlib Governorate.¹¹ The final battle pitched the regime against the Khaled Ibn al-Walid group, an affiliate of Islamic State, in the Yarmouq Valley.¹²

While Russia and the regime coordinated their military and negotiation efforts, the latter also had its own strategy and channels of negotiation with opposition groups. This was well illustrated in towns of Inkhil and Dael, located on a line between Damascus and Daraa City, and most parts of Quneitra Governorate. The fact that the regime returned without Russian involvement allowed it to build up a significant military and security presence. It can easily carry out arrests with little resistance.¹³ In those areas, Russia's engagement appears to be relatively limited.

To prepare the way for its return to the south, the regime began intensifying its contacts with rebels and civilians living in opposition-held areas months before the campaign. It relied on intermediaries, most of whom were Baath Party members, retired generals, local notables, *mukhtars* (local administrative officials), and state employees, such as former mayors. The ultimate goal was to secure surrender deals, or "reconciliations," to use the regime's terminology.

These intermediaries had access to the regime's senior regional security and civilian officials, and they enjoyed influence in rebel-held localities, which often happened to be their home region.¹⁴ In fact, some of these individuals lived in opposition-held Daraa and, at times, were openly pro-regime. While there were attempts by rebels to target them,¹⁵ most were safely shielded through their family and clan affiliations.¹⁶ One of the most telling incidents involved two persons who lived in opposition-held Daraa and participated in the Russian-sponsored Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in Sochi in January 2018. After the meeting the two returned to their homes, where a rebel body, the so-called Court of Justice in Hawran, had issued a warrant for their arrest. However, because of tribal protection the two were never brought before the rebel tribunal.¹⁷

The regime used this network of intermediaries in a systematic fashion. It created local reconciliation committees months before its military offensive. These were composed of intermediaries in the towns whose task was to pave the way for a return of the regime's forces.¹⁸ This included a promise from the state that it would resume state services, provide humanitarian aid, annul arbitrarily issued warrants for those accused of committing political crimes, and avoid bloodshed by not targeting a town militarily.¹⁹ The regime, often without coordinating with Russia, secured many such deals, allowing for the deployment of security and military personnel.

However, there was at least one exception to this. After military operations in the south had ended, one part of Al-Sanamayn—an important town in northern Daraa Governorate—remained under the control of an armed group that retained its light weapons and often clashed with regime or pro-regime combatants.²⁰ Thus it was neither included within a Russian-sponsored agreement nor was it fully recaptured.²¹ The holdouts resisted the return of regime forces until March 2020, when the regime retook the rebel-held area militarily. This would have repercussions throughout Daraa Governorate and underlined the complexity and tentativeness of the regime's return to the region.

The Assad regime remains dissatisfied with the situation in the south. As one official put it, the state would not tolerate areas remaining outside its control and exploited by “terrorists.”²² In early May 2020, the regime showed its intentions when it exploited the killing of nine local policemen by a former rebel to strengthen its position in southwestern parts of Daraa Governorate.²³ Though local notables strongly condemned the crime,²⁴ the regime sent in military units to reinforce its presence in an area where its control had until then been limited.²⁵

The regime’s deployment of military units, particularly ones known to have ties with Iran, was a challenge to the order that Russia has created and maintained in parts of the south. Moscow’s ongoing de-escalation efforts suggest it is still committed to maintaining the status quo. However, the mere fact that an escalation took place emphasized that there are limits to what Russia can do.

The Aftermath: The Regime’s Battle for Control

Despite its successful campaign to retake the south, the regime’s military forces have remained vulnerable even in their strongholds. The Russian strategy of return, by granting a margin of maneuver to former rebel groups, transformed the conflict in the south from open rebellion to low-intensity resistance that has taken violent and nonviolent forms. The regime’s efforts to reassert its authority have also included nonviolent means, namely restoring the redistributive role of the state by providing basic necessities in exchange for support. But, even when effective, these efforts have hit up against the state’s dwindling capacities.

Russia has regarded this anomalous security situation as a necessary price to pay to ensure stability in the border region and head off any reaction by Israel or Jordan. By preventing a return in strength of the regime’s security apparatus, Russia has reduced the chances of a major deployment of Iranian and pro-Iranian proxy forces near the Golan Heights and the border with Jordan.

The situation in Al-Sanamayn illustrates the myriad obstacles the regime has faced since its return to the south. The dynamics there resemble those in other parts of Daraa Governorate. In early March 2020, the regime launched an operation to impose its authority over those parts of Al-Sanamayn still in rebel hands. According to official sources, it initiated the operation in response to calls from residents to restore law and order.²⁶ More importantly, this represented a message that Damascus would not accept that areas remain outside its control in the region. However, the operation provoked a reaction across Daraa Governorate, in which people mobilized against the regime’s actions.²⁷ This took a violent turn when gunmen exchanged fire with the regime’s military and security personnel, attacked their positions, and even took hostages.²⁸ The operation in Al-Sanamayn ended thanks

to a mediated solution negotiated by Russia's man, Ahmad al-Audeh. Those armed rebels who did not want to live under the regime's sway could evacuate to other rebel-held areas. That was followed by the regime taking full control of Al-Sanamayn.

The intense reaction across Daraa Governorate to the developments in Al-Sanamayn was not unprecedented. Protests had taken place previously, especially in areas where the regime had no means of cracking down on demonstrators. According to one count, between November 2019 and January 2020 there were at least eleven demonstrations, fifteen sit-ins, and fifteen incidents of anti-government graffiti in the governorate.²⁹

More consequential have been cases of violent resistance, which have taken a systematic and frequent character ever since the regime's return. Many people, including former rebels as well as regime and even Russian personnel have been the targets of assassinations.³⁰ As one observer put it, "everyone is assassinating everyone."³¹ Those behind such actions and their motivations are often unknown. The war has left a legacy of political, economic, personal, and family antagonisms that have remained unresolved, likely fueling the killings. Nonetheless, the regime's security, military, and civilian personnel, including those who mediated between the regime and towns, have been regularly marked for attack. According to one opposition monitoring group, since its return to the south, the regime has lost around ninety military personnel, the most senior being a colonel.³² While the assailants may not have been able to hit particularly hard, such attacks have not occurred in other parts of Syria and underline the regime's uncertain control, especially over Daraa.

Another conclusion from Al-Sanamayn and the reaction to the regime's takeover of rebel-held areas is that where Russia brokered deals—Busra al-Sham, Daraa City, and Tafas—there remains the possibility of organized armed resistance. In several instances, the arrest of former rebels or civilians from Tafas and Daraa City at regime checkpoints located outside the zones covered by the Russian agreement provoked an escalation. Former rebels mobilized their networks and threatened to destabilize the situation unless the detainees were released. Some of those threats led to armed confrontations while others died out. However, the reality remains that opposition groups are still able to defend themselves against the regime's transgressions.

In Busra al-Sham the situation has been more complicated, characterized by a mixture of restraint and defiance. The regime is more cautious with the Fifth Corps led by Audeh, as it is protected by Russia. In fact, in several instances, Audeh and his comrades have antagonized the regime's military and security personnel without facing any consequences. In one incident, they attacked security officers who reportedly were running a checkpoint in the southeast of Daraa Governorate that mistreated those passing through, but Audeh's group suffered no reprisals.³³

Similarly, in August 2019 Audeh's men beat up a pro-regime journalist upon entering Busra al-Sham. He had published a Facebook post that was disrespectful of Abdul Baset al-Sarut, a former football player who joined the rebels and became a symbol of the Syrian uprising. When the perpetrator was asked whether he was not afraid of regime retaliation, he reportedly replied, "I know the regime wants revenge. I have received indirect threats. But I can go to Damascus [without problems] because I have Ahmad [Audeh] behind me."³⁴

Outside Busra al-Sham, Tafas, and Daraa City, the regime is in greater control, though it still faces serious challenges. An assassination attempt in March 2020 against the mayor of Inkhil—a security stronghold—indicates that regime forces are at risk even in such locations.³⁵ In Jasem, where the regime has reestablished a security presence, but not as strongly as in Inkhil, the challenges are more evident. For example, the local General Intelligence Directorate branch tried to arrest a former rebel leader but failed when the twenty soldiers sent to arrest him were disarmed and held hostage after word of the operation had reached their target. He called up his comrades who brought their weapons and prevented the action.³⁶

While violence has dominated narratives emerging from Daraa Governorate, another defining characteristic of the situation there since the regime has come back is that negotiations and conflict-mitigation efforts are frequent. An example is Ahmad al-Audeh himself, who often acts as an intermediary in defusing tensions, as was the case in Al-Sanamayn. Because he derives his power from Russia, he can talk to both the regime and former opposition members.

However, Audeh is not alone. The so-called Central Committee in Daraa plays a similar role in Daraa City and other parts of the governorate. It brings together influential former civilian and military opposition leaders and local notables. Because it enjoys backing from Russia and contacts within the regime, as well as support from former rebels, the general public, and major tribal clans, the committee has been in a good position to resolve conflicts. It has been involved in issues ranging from responding to robberies and kidnappings, releasing detainees, and mitigating armed violence between non-state actors as well as between former rebels and the regime.³⁷ The committee's access to regime officials, facilitated by Russia, has stretched beyond the south to include senior officials in Damascus, such as Ali Mamlouk, the head of the Baath Party's National Security Bureau.³⁸ The efforts of the committee have not always yielded positive results but, as one observer put it, "regardless of how we evaluate their work, they have benefited Daraa."³⁹

Finally, another feature of the regime's return to the southern border region is the helplessness of former rebels who do not enjoy, or who may no longer enjoy, Russian protection. The regime forces' takeover of rebel areas in Al-Sanamayn underlined the vulnerability of such groups. It showed that,

even though it is unable to impose its writ everywhere in Daraa, Damascus can do so by focusing its energies on specific localities. At this time, it is hard to imagine that the regime will repeat in Busra al-Sham, Daraa City, and Tafas what it did in Al-Sanamayn, given that the rebels there are better armed, maintain organizational structures, and could put up a fight. However, if Russia's pledge to uphold the conditions of the agreement with the rebels were to evaporate, the regime would be in a stronger position to bring these localities back under its full military and security control.

Thus far, Russia has been engaged in maintaining the status quo. Moreover, it is conceivable that, realizing that Iran and its allies may push back against the order it has established in parts of the south, Moscow may try to shore up its influence there by mobilizing former rebels and even bringing back to Daraa some former rebel commanders who are now in Jordan.⁴⁰ In fact, there have been reports in Daraa and Jordan that this has been taking place, but it has not been possible to verify this. However, some prominent former opposition members in Daraa have criticized Russia for not being proactive enough in countering regime violations of the agreement.⁴¹ The extent of Moscow's commitment seems to vary from one locality to another. In some areas under firm regime control, it is nearly nonexistent. Others have argued that Russia's strong commitment to upholding the agreement in Busra al-Sham has differed in Tafas and Daraa City, where the agreement is often violated by the regime.⁴²

While all this may be true, Moscow has remained committed to the core of the agreement, which is to keep the regime's security and military presence limited. This, in turn, would significantly decrease the ability of Iran and pro-Iranian forces to broaden their presence in the southern border region. In order to maintain the agreement Russia has repeatedly intervened in Tafas and Daraa City to mitigate conflicts between former rebels and the regime that could potentially jeopardize the settlement.⁴³ As one journalist from Daraa familiar with the situation on the ground put it, "Unlike Audeh, rebels in Tafas still behave as an opposition force. They wouldn't have endured without Russia's protection."⁴⁴ Russian safeguards have given former rebels a margin of maneuver, but they have also tied their fate to the Russian presence, making them more likely to advance Moscow's interests in the south.

Beyond the deadly game of assassinations and military escalations, the regime has sought to provide services and basic necessities to communities where it has regained authority in order to coopt them. Damascus appears to be reviving the pre-2011 social contract, whereby the state provided basic necessities to communities in exchange for local support and social peace.⁴⁵ This helped ensure that many basic commodities and services were more affordable, but it also handed the regime a powerful tool of control over society. It seems that, after almost a decade of conflict, the Syrian leadership still believes that this mechanism can be effective.

In an interview in late 2019, Assad stated “We are still [a] socialist [country]. We have a public sector, a very big public sector.”⁴⁶ Throughout the war the regime did not fully abandon this logic. It continued to pay civil servants who lived in many opposition-held areas, including the south, even if inflation meant salaries were worth less.⁴⁷ Additionally, travelling to regime-held areas to receive salaries, or any other subsidized state service, involved a security risk. Yet the regime wanted to maintain links with loyal or apolitical segments of the population. As one lawyer from Daraa whose family continued receiving a pension put it, the regime operated according to “a logic of the state.”⁴⁸

Reviving the provision goods and services to inhabitants in the south became a key rallying point for regime officials and their intermediaries before and during the military campaign.⁴⁹ Part of the appeal of this message resulted from the failure of the opposition to create alternatives to the state. The network of war profiteers that emerged at the intersection of aid provision, local councils, and armed opposition groups came to embody the frustration that locals had toward opposition institutions. One activist and journalist recalled the kidnapping of his brother who worked as a local monitor for a foreign aid organization:

He was monitoring the distribution of aid by the local [town] council in [Daraa Governorate] when he realized that 150 food baskets were missing. He filed a report. A few days later I was informed that he had been kidnapped. With the help of the armed faction that controlled my town and an honorable rebel leader from Nawa, we found him and secured his release. He had been severely tortured. The accusation was that he was a regime agent, but it was because of the 150 aid baskets. The [armed group] that kidnapped him had an agreement with the aid organization and the local council to steal the aid. There are hundreds of such stories that never made it to media outlets.⁵⁰

After its return, the regime attempted to restore subsidized services and goods. For instance, Damascus resupplied the region with subsidized cooking gas, fuel, and wheat—three commodities whose supply primarily depended on the government’s intention to distribute them or not.⁵¹ These goods were also available during the period of opposition rule, although taxes levied at regime and rebel checkpoints ensured that cooking gas, like many other commodities, was more expensive than in regime-held areas.⁵² More recently, the government has also tried to control the prices of nonsubsidized foods.⁵³

However, there is a disparity in providing goods and services. This had already been the case in the past and was exacerbated by the war. The regime’s security policies exclude some categories of the population from receiving benefits; for example, some state employees were dismissed for having had connections with the opposition. The head of the Lawyers Syndicate announced during the military

campaign in July 2018 that 250 out of 700 lawyers had been dismissed and could no longer practice their profession.⁵⁴ Returning all state employees to their positions was one of the demands of the opposition included in the agreement with Russia and the regime.⁵⁵ The state has only partially backtracked on this decision. In the case of the lawyers, some were readmitted. Others, presumably those who were more involved with the opposition, are still awaiting to obtain a security clearance.⁵⁶

Personal networks and contacts, along with localism, have also helped create disparities. People in positions of power in a locality, or who have access to influential people, often have the latitude to define what is distributed in that particular locality and who benefits, regardless of how the regime recaptured the area or how strong its presence. Even before the conflict, personal connections or animosities could make or unmake projects in a given place.⁵⁷

This is still true today in Daraa Governorate. The cases of Busra al-Harir, Tafas, and Inkhil—three cities with very different relationships with the regime—indicate that personal relationship impact how services were delivered to an area, regardless of how strongly it fought off the regime. Busra al-Harir, the first major town to be recaptured by the regime, put up a strong fight and the regime required military force to capture it. But the mayor, a native technocrat perceived as being pro-regime and who has good contacts with Daraa's governor, resumed the provision of services to the city.⁵⁸ Inkhil, on the contrary, was quick to surrender to Damascus.⁵⁹ But the new pro-regime mayor has still been vital in attracting scarce state resources to the town.⁶⁰ In Tafas, too, personal relations have been effective in attracting services despite it being a locus for anti-regime activities.⁶¹

The state's lack of resources is another crucial factor in what happens in the south, as the restoration of electricity shows. During the period of control by the rebels, one local activist recalled, the Electricity Directorate's warehouses, which included pylons, cables, and other equipment, were all looted.⁶² Lack of resources put the burden of rehabilitation on the inhabitants themselves, creating disparities. In the Yarmouk Valley, for instance, several towns now receive electricity from the state, sometimes for twelve hours a day. Sahem Golan, however, received electricity about six months earlier than other places. The townspeople paid for the rehabilitation out of their pockets, which accelerated the process.⁶³ Something similar occurred in Al-Sanamayn where directorate officials reportedly approached the residents of a neighborhood and said that they could provide power if the locals paid for the pylons.⁶⁴

As for goods, the regime's capacity to maintain current levels of subsidized goods, let alone increase them, is more and more difficult given the economic hardship that Syria is facing. Peasants, who ought to be key beneficiaries of Baath socialist rule, are increasingly left with little assistance. The prices of important fertilizers, such as urea 46, ammonium nitrate 30, and triple superphosphate 46,

increased by 91 percent, 190 percent, and 154 percent respectively between 2017 and 2020.⁶⁵ The head of the Damascus Farmers Union has said that the government's decision to raise fertilizer prices would have a negative impact on farmers who face high production costs and might have to decrease output.⁶⁶

Since the economy is unlikely to generate enough value for the regime to be able to pursue its assistance, it has channeled outside development and humanitarian aid to support its redistributive institutions. For instance, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, with support from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, is helping the government to provide farmers across Syria with quality seeds to offset their shortage and prevent food insecurity. Before the conflict, the General Organization for Seed Multiplication, a state institution that provides quality seeds at subsidized prices, supplied farmers with up to 300,000 tons of seeds per year. Its capacity in 2019 had declined to 35,000 tons.⁶⁷ Such programs may allow the regime to maintain some of its subsidized programs afloat, but officials cannot hope to revive the redistributive economy without massive foreign aid, which is simply not forthcoming at the moment.

The reality is that Syria is bankrupt. The depreciation of the currency since the regime returned to the south—from 450 Syrian pounds (SYP) to the dollar to SYP 2,400 to the dollar, as of June 2020—is a startling indication of this.⁶⁸ As one resident of Tafas put it: "I think the state doesn't have the capacity to provide services. Otherwise, it would do so to silence people. Sometime I feel that our area is better served than [regime areas]. I tell you, the regime wants to appease people."⁶⁹

The instability in the south is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. The regime will continue its battle to seize all territories that remain outside of its control. Its efforts, however, are likely to provoke the disapproval of Russia and neighboring countries because the regime's return could facilitate the expansion of Iran's and Hezbollah's roles in the border region. Meanwhile, the state's dwindling resources will undermine whatever is left of its capacities to mobilize support, exacerbating socioeconomic problems. These conditions will generate instability, and, given the regional implications of what happens in southern Syria, the risks of a broader conflagration will remain.

From a Border Area to a Zone of Regional Contention

The war in Syria has transformed the south of the country from a border region that had an inactive front with Israel and a vibrant cross-border economy with Jordan into a volatile zone that has become a focal point of regional rivalries. Developments there, forged by local, regional, and international actors, could have ramifications that extend far beyond the area.

The young generation in the south has no firsthand recollection of the last Syrian-Israeli war, which took place in 1973, almost four decades before the uprising. That unsettled conflict, however, impacted the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the border area in many ways. This has been particularly true of security regulations in the south, which have been justified as necessary in light of the conflict with Israel. For example, Law 41/2004, the latest version of a series of similar laws, made property transactions in border areas—building, transferring ownership, or renting property for more than three years—subject to prior approval by the security services. One of the first demands of the protestors in Daraa in March 2011 was that the law be rescinded.⁷⁰ The reason is that security officials misused it to extort money from locals. A notable from Daraa recalled an episode from before the uprising: “I wanted to pass on a small piece of land to my son. Security approval took two years. At the end I relied on a friend who pushed the matter forward.”⁷¹

Today’s complications with respect to Israel dwarf the ones that existed previously. The Iranian presence has become the main point of contention. In November 2017, before regime forces retook the south, Jordan, Russia, and the United States signed an agreement affirming that foreign forces and combatants would not be allowed into a zone that covered most of Daraa and Quneitra Governorates.⁷² Officially, Israel was not a signatory, though that particular condition explicitly recognized an important Israeli red line in the area. Iran and Iranian-backed forces, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, would be barred from deploying to large areas of the south near the occupied Golan Heights, setting up precision weapons there, and building permanent bases or any infrastructure allowing for attacks against Israel.⁷³

For Jordan, too, the presence of Iran near its border was problematic. In November 2017, King Abdullah II expressed his concerns and vowed to defend his country’s northern border against “foreign militias,” in reference to pro-Iranian forces.⁷⁴ Amman feared that their proximity might give them leeway to destabilize the kingdom.⁷⁵ The potential destabilizing effect of the Iranian presence, especially in Daraa, was also a concern because of the impact it might have on Syrian refugees. Jordan was hosting more than 1 million refugees and could not absorb more, while it also understood that stability in southern Syria would be necessary for their return.⁷⁶

These Israeli and Jordanian fears made it likely that both countries would respond to any effort by Iran and its allies to return to the border. This opened the door to Russia’s mediation efforts to pave the way for the regime’s return to the south. Iran, for its part, announced it would not participate in the military operations in southern Syria.⁷⁷ Though some reports surfaced on the involvement of some Iranian-backed militias, Tehran and its proxies did not play a major role.⁷⁸

Iran's presence, whether expressed directly or through local and foreign armed groups, and the actual size of Iranian and proxy forces are matters of debate. Iran does have a foothold in southern Syria. Hezbollah was present in Quneitra Province before the regime offensive in 2018,⁷⁹ and it has likely expanded its presence. The protests in the south in areas outside the regime's military and security control often include demands for the departure of so-called "Iranian militias," in reference to Hezbollah and other local actors perceived as proxies of Iran.⁸⁰ Some opposition platforms have provided details of this presence, claiming it is getting stronger.⁸¹ However, such accounts may be exaggerated and not all observers share this view.⁸²

Iran's operational methods in the south make it difficult to assess the number of personnel it has deployed. According to a recent Israeli intelligence estimate, it has 800 operatives throughout Syria and works through allied groups.⁸³ The Syrian Army's Fourth Armored Division and Air Force Intelligence Directorate are widely known to have close relations with Iran. This does not imply complete dependency, but ties do exist.⁸⁴ These Syrian forces might be playing Iran's game, but they are not die-hard soldiers supporting an Iranian agenda. Often their motivations involve increasing their own income or personal security. A former resident of a town in Daraa offered such a view:

After the [June 2018] offensive, the Fourth Division recruited thirty guys from my town. They used to be part of Jaish al-Yarmouq. I can assure you that these guys didn't know what three plus three equaled. They had to protect themselves. They didn't know which party belonged to which international power. They needed to protect themselves.⁸⁵

By December 2017 Israel said that it had carried out around one hundred airstrikes in Syria. Ever since, the attacks have continued. However, only a few have hit targets in the south.⁸⁶ That just a small proportion of them has targeted Daraa Governorate is an indication that Israel's red lines have not been crossed there. Russia's involvement in the south and its influence over Syria and Iran have provided added assurances for Israel and Jordan against an extension of Iran's presence. Thus far, Moscow has abided by that engagement and preserved the status quo, limiting the scope of the regime's return. It has also cemented its place as guarantor of a fragile balance rather than as a regime ally.

This new reality has transformed the boundary between Syria and Israel. If the 1974 disengagement line represents the Syrian-Israeli frontline before the 2011 uprising, then today that frontline has very different characteristics. It is defined by the presence of a variety of forces, zones of control that are shifting, and an area of Israeli military operations that potentially lies much deeper inside Syrian territory. In other words, the state cannot reestablish its sovereign control over the south without considering the impact of this on Israel and to a lesser extent Jordan. Iran, too, cannot ignore Israeli or Jordanian concerns, or it risks provoking a confrontation.

The new realities in the south also illustrate that Iran's frontline with Israel is no longer limited to southern Lebanon. This does not automatically mean that war is imminent on the Syrian-Israeli front. Rather, it means that Iran can now use Syrian territory to antagonize Israel, unlike before 2011. This should be understood more as a tactical step to prove Iranian relevance on the border, rather than an attempt to fracture the present balance. But while Iran appears not to want an escalation in Syria's south now, that could change.

Conclusion

Volatility will remain the defining characteristic of Syria's south for the foreseeable future. The regime's efforts to impose greater sovereign control through violence will continue, and so will the resistance to this approach in the south. Meanwhile, Russia and Iran will seek to bolster their influence in the southern governorates. For as long as their actions do not fundamentally alter the status quo agreed by Jordan, Russia, the United States, and implicitly Israel in 2018—which at its heart means limiting the presence of Iran and its proxies in the south—they will have relatively limited regional implications.

However, that does not mean that a dangerous escalation is impossible, or even unlikely. Iran cannot be pleased to find its margin of maneuver constricted by Russia, in agreement with the United States and Israel, its two principal enemies in the Middle East. Moreover, the situation must be understood in the context of rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria and their influence over political outcomes in the country. If Tehran were to challenge the current situation, this could have transboundary ramifications and would likely provoke an increase in Israeli airstrikes against it and its proxy forces in southern Syria and beyond. Where this would lead is an open question and would be tied in to Iran's ability to deter Israel. While such a scenario may not be imminent, it cannot be dismissed.

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Acknowledgments

This publication was produced with support from the X-Border Local Research Network, a component of the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) X-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program, funded by UK aid from the UK government. The X-Border Local Research Network—a partnership between the Asia Foundation, the Carnegie Middle East Center, and the Rift Valley Institute— carries out research work to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. It supports more effective policymaking and development programming and builds the skills of local partners. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this publication are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Carnegie Middle East Center or the UK government.

Notes

- 1 Walid al-Nofal and Justin Clark, “Advancing Damascus-Led Forces Bisect Eastern Daraa Countryside in Battle for Syria’s Southwest,” *Syria Direct*, June 26, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2VpL691>.
- 2 Before the military campaign in June 2018, Russia engaged in several meetings with rebel representatives that involved discussions on finding a formula to allow the state’s return to the south. Author interview with a participant in negotiations with Russian representatives, Irbid, Jordan, March 14, 2020.
- 3 For a more detailed description, see Humanitarian Access Team, “Southern Syria Reconciliation Agreement Update,” January 2019, <https://www.humanitarianaccessteam.org/reports/situation-reports/situation-report-southern-syria-reconciliation-agreement-update>.
- 4 “Member of Syrian Negotiation Committee Bashar al-Zu’bi Refuses Russia’s Conditions in Daraa,” YouTube video, 0:40, posted by “Eldorar Elshamia,” June 30, 2018, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhgSOX6ZmfA>.
- 5 On one occasion, Russia and the regime conducted more than 600 airstrikes in the fifteen hours that followed a failed round of negotiations. See “More Than 600 Airstrikes Target Daraa Governorate in 15 Hours of the Return of the Hysterical Shelling,” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, July 5, 2018, <https://bit.ly/34yF4XK>.
- 6 Abdullah al-Jabassini, “From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria,” Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, May 14, 2019, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/62964/RR_2019_09_EN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
- 7 For instance, in a recent incident the opponents did not even allow the head of the police force to enter their area of control. See “Ahali Dar’a al-Balad Yarfudun Dukhul Qa’id Shurtat al-Nizam” [Daraa al-Balad Residents Deny Entry to Regime’s Police Chief, *Zaman al-Wasl*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/122703/>. See also author interview with an activist in Daraa City, Syria (via Skype), April 11, 2020. There is also a group led Mustafa al-Masalmeh (known as Al-Kasm), who works for the regime’s Military Intelligence Directorate, but the nature of his official affiliation is unclear.
- 8 Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi, “Tensions in West Deraa Countryside: Interview,” May 21, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/05/tensions-in-west-deraa-countryside-interview>.
- 9 Author interview with a Tafas resident, Daraa, Syria (via Skype), April 12, 2020.
- 10 Author interview with two members of Tajammu‘ Ahrar Hawran, Irbid, Jordan, March 13, 2020; author interview with Syrian journalist, Amman, Jordan, October 27, 2019; author interview with activist and journalist from Daraa currently residing in Paris, France (via Skype), November 22, 2019; and author interview with a former Daraa municipality official, Irbid, Jordan, March 10, 2020.
- 11 “Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation in Dara’a, Quneitra and As-Sweida Governorates, Situation Report No. 6,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, August 18, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-situation-dara-qunaitra-and-sweida>.
- 12 “The Rapid Collapses of Jaysh Khaled Ibn Al-Waleed Decrease Its Scope of Control in Daraa to 2% and the Regime Forces Continue Their Military Operations in Yarmouk Basin in Seeking for Ending Its Presence [sic],” Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, July 26, 2018, <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=98935>.
- 13 Author interview with a former Daraa municipality official, Irbid, Jordan, March 10, 2020; author interview with Syrian journalist, Amman, Jordan, October 27, 2019; and author interview with a participant in negotiations with Russia, Irbid, Jordan, March 14, 2020.

- 14 Notable officials involved include Lu'ai al-Ali, currently the head of Military Intelligence in the south, and Khaled al-Hanou, the former governor of Daraa. For more on the concept of intermediaries, see Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur (Eds), *Local Intermediaries in Post-2011 Syria: Transformation and Continuity* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2019), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/15547.pdf>.
- 15 There was a failed assassination attempt against the *mukhtar* of Al-Karak al-Sharqi who openly supported the regime. From author interview with a former fighter turned activist, Amman, Jordan, October 28, 2019.
- 16 One former Yadouda resident said, "The *mukhtar* of Yadouda town, who is from the Qaddis family, publicly supported the regime [before 2018]. No one harmed him. He had a house in Damascus and one in Daraa and would commute. He used to call for the return of state institutions. When the regime controlled the town, he welcomed them. This applies to the mayor of Al-Musayfra, Abdulillah al-Zu'bi, who welcomed the regime upon their arrival," from author interview with a former resident from near Yadouda currently residing in Amman, Jordan (via Skype), November 29, 2019. Another former Inkhil resident said, "In Inkhil there were people who openly supported the regime without anyone targeting them because of their tribal affiliation," from author interview with a former Inkhil resident, Amman, Jordan, October 27, 2019.
- 17 Author interview with a notable from Nawa, Irbid, Jordan, December 15, 2019. For the details of the story, see Walid al-Nofal, "Daraa: Quwa Asha'iriyya Tu'iq Muhakamat Musharikin fi Sochi" [Tribal Forces Hinder the Trial of Sochi Participants], *Al-Modon*, July 2, 2018, <https://bit.ly/34A324M>.
- 18 As one activist explained, "Before the offensive, Baathists from my town near Kherbet Ghazaleh met with the governor who told them to tell people that the state would restore services if they reconciled," from author interview with a member of Tajammu' Ahrar Hawran, Irbid, Jordan, March 13, 2020. A Daraa resident added, "A few months before the offensive, regime contacts with reconciliation committees, which existed in every town, increased markedly. They were the connecting ring between the opposition and the regime. They were part of the Baath Party. [Before the war] they already had relations with the Syria intelligence," from author interview with an activist and journalist from Daraa currently residing in Paris, France (via Skype), November 22, 2019. A Sahwa resident also noted, "After intense shelling the regime reached out to notables in Sahwa, including the mayor of the town, members of the Baath party, and so on, and through them reached out to the factions to settle the situation," from author interview with a former Sahwa resident currently residing in a European country (via Skype), November 28, 2020.
- 19 Author interview a notable from Nawa, Irbid, Jordan, December 15, 2019.
- 20 "The Situation in Daraa After Regime's Control," Syrian Civic Platform, June 3, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3crC2HL>.
- 21 Author interview with Syrian journalist from Daraa City, Syria (via Skype), April 11, 2020.
- 22 Silva Razzouq, "Al-Zu'bi lil Watan: Al-Irhabi al-Subayhi Qaid al-Mulahaqa wa al-Dawleh Lan Tatrak al-Manatiq Ilaty Yastaghiluha al-Irhabiyoun fi Dar'a bi Hatha al-Shakl" [Al-Zu'bi to *Al-Watan*: The Terrorist Subayhi is Being Prosecuted and the State Will Not Allow the Areas Exploited by the Terrorists in Daraa to Remain in This Way], *Al-Watan*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.alwatanonline.com/الزعيبي-الوطن-الإرهابي-الصبيحي-ق>.
- 23 Ammar al-Ali, "Gunmen kill 9 Assad regime policemen in SW Syria," Anadolu Agency, May 4, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/gunmen-kill-9-assad-regime-policemen-in-sw-syria/1828591>.
- 24 Walid al-Nofal, Twitter post, May 5, 2020, 3:42 a.m., https://twitter.com/walid_ALnofal/status/1257485672467836929.

- 25 “Istinfar wa Takhawof Li’ahali Dar’a Ba’d Taharok Wahdat ‘Askariyeh Liqawat al-Nizam fi Rif Dar’a” [Daraa Residents Fear After Regime Military Units Move to Governorate’s Countryside], Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 6, 2020, <https://bit.ly/31ekIDu>.
- 26 “Al-Jihat al-Mukhtassa wa Quwat Hafz al-Nizam Tunhi Halet al-Falatan al-Amni fi al-Sanamayn” [Designated Parties and Law Enforcement Forces End the Lawlessness in Al-Sanamayn], SANA, March 3, 2020, <https://sana.sy/?p=1116936>.
- 27 See, for example, “Muthaharaat fi Busra al-Sham bi Dar’a lil Tadamun m’a Idlib wa Al-Sanamayn” [Protests in Busra al-Sham in Daraa in Solidarity with Idlib and Al-Sanamayn], *Enab Baladi*, March 1, 2020, <https://enabbaladi.net/archives/366976>.
- 28 One observer remarked, “During the Al-Sanamayn problems, the opposition arrested fifty-four regime personnel altogether. They were released later,” from author interview with a member of Tajammu’ Ahrar Hawran, Irbid, Jordan, March 13, 2020. See also Walid al-Nofal, “Clashes in Daraa Evoke Memories of the Start of the Syrian Revolution,” *Syria Direct*, March 2, 2020, <https://syriadirect.org/news/clashes-in-daraa-evoke-memories-of-the-start-of-the-syrian-revolution-1/>.
- 29 Walid al-Nofal, “Protests in Daraa: Russia Absent as Damascus Weaponizes ‘Tribal Schisms,’” *Syria Direct*, February 5, 2020, <https://syriadirect.org/news/protests-in-daraa-russia-absent-as-damascus-weaponizes-%E2%80%98tribal-schisms%E2%80%99/>.
- 30 “On the Ruins of the Settlement,” Daraa Martyrs Documentation Center, January 21, 2020, <http://daraamartyrs.org/?p=19390>.
- 31 Author interview with a Syrian journalist, Amman, Jordan, October 27, 2019.
- 32 Author interview with a member of Tajammu’ Ahrar al-Hawran currently residing in Irbid, Jordan (via Skype), May 30, 2020.
- 33 Author interview with a person close to Ahmad al-Audeh, who asked that the city where the interview took place in Jordan not be identified, March 9, 2020.
- 34 Author interview with two members of Tajammu’ Ahrar Hawran, Irbid, Jordan, March 13, 2020.
- 35 “Dar’a ... Majhulun Yaghtalun Madaniyan fi ‘Tafas’ wa Yuhawelluna Ightiyal Ra’is Baladiyet ‘Inkhil” [Daraa: Unknown Assailants Assassinate a Civilian in Tafas and Try to Assassinate the Mayor of Inkhil], *Zaman al-Wasel*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/122309/>. Also, author interview with a Syrian journalist from Inkhil currently residing in Amman, Jordan (via Skype), April 12, 2020.
- 36 Author interview with two members from Tajammu’ Ahrar Hawran, Irbid, Jordan, March 13, 2020.
- 37 One activist explained, “When there is a problem, people tend to complain to the central committee. I am following a story with someone whose motorbike was stolen in Daraa City, he complained to the committee and not to the police,” from author interview with former fighter turned activist, Amman, Jordan, October 28, 2019. See also “Ijtima’ Bayn Lijnet Tafawud Dar’a ma’ Wazir al-Difa’ wa Zhubat Barizin lil Nizam fi Dimashq” [Meeting Between the Daraa Negotiating Committee and the Defense Minister and Senior Regime Officers in Damascus], Smart News Agency, April 15, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3fVJa0B>.
- 38 “Ijtima’ Bayn Lijnet Tafawud Dar’a ma’ Wazir al-Difa’ wa Zhubat Barizin lil Nizam fi Dimashq” [Meeting Between the Daraa Negotiating Committee and the Defense Minister and Senior Regime Officers in Damascus].
- 39 One Syrian commented, “You can trust the committee. When there is an arrest, they intervene. Sometimes it works. Other times they say ‘the person is transferred to Damascus, we cannot do anything,’” from author interview with a former humanitarian worker, Tafas, Syria (via Skype), April 12, 2020. Another civil society leader said, “When the committee met with Ali Mamlouk they asked to

- remove charges [against opposition members] for good but they only extended the *taswiyeh* [settlement agreement] temporarily,” from author interview with civil society leader who asked that the city where the interview took place in Jordan not be identified, October 31, 2019.
- 40 Author interview with Tafas resident, Syria (via Skype), May 22, 2020; and author interview with a civil society leader currently residing in Irbid, Jordan (via Skype), June 1, 2020.
- 41 Nofal, “Protests in Daraa: Russia Absent as Damascus Weaponizes ‘Tribal Schisms.’”
- 42 See, for instance, Abdullah al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria,” Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, June 2019, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/60664/RSCAS_2019_06.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
- 43 From author interview with civil society leader who asked that the city where the interview took place in Jordan not be identified, October 31, 2019; and author interview with a resident from Tafas, Syria (via Skype), May 22, 2020. See also, for example, “Madmun Itifaq Lijan Dar‘a al-Markaziyya m‘a al-Janeb al-Russi” [The Minutes of the Meeting Between the Central Daraa Committees and the Russian Side], Daraa 24, May 15, 2020, <https://daraa24.org/المضمون-اجتماع-لجان-در-عا-المركزية-مع-الج/>.
- 44 Author interview, Syrian journalist from Daraa currently residing in Paris, France (via Skype), November 22, 2019.
- 45 Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 76; see also Laura Ruiz de Elvira, Christoph H. Schwarz, and Irene Weipert-Fenner, “Introduction: Networks of Dependency, a Research Perspective” in Laura Ruiz de Elvira, Christoph H. Schwarz, and Irene Weipert-Fenner (eds), *Clientelism and Patronage in the Middle East and North Africa Networks of Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.
- 46 “Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” YouTube video, 24:07, posted by “Al Mayadeen Programs,” December 9, 2019, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HahlZhzXtuk&feature=youtu.be>.
- 47 Author interview with former resident from Daraa currently residing in a European country (via Skype), November 28, 2019; author interview with a former Daraa municipality official, Irbid, Jordan, March 10, 2020; and author interview with a participant in the negotiations with Russian representatives, Irbid, March 14, 2020.
- 48 Author interview with a lawyer from Daraa, Amman, Jordan, December 15, 2020.
- 49 One lawyer mentioned, “The regime promised services ... Most people who I know heard this from Syrian officials,” from author interview with a lawyer from Daraa, Amman, Jordan, December 15, 2020; and author interview with two member from Tajammu‘ Ahrar Hawran, Irbid, Jordan, March 13, 2020.
- 50 Author interview with an activist and journalist from Daraa currently residing in Paris, France (via Skype), November 22, 2019. Another commentator said, “Armed groups were the strongest actor on the ground. They had strong influence on the local council of Al-Sahwa, my town,” from author interview with a former Al-Sahwa (Daraa) resident currently residing in a European country (via Skype), November 28, 2019.
- 51 One Daraa resident noted, “State services like water, bread, and electricity didn’t return equally to all parts of Daraa. But in general the situation improved everywhere,” from author interview with a former fighter turned activist, Amman, Jordan, October 28, 2019. According to this opposition source, for example, the regime resupplied bakeries with fuel and wheat after its return. See “‘Al-Taswiyyah’ Taftah Mawridan Maliyyan li Khazinet al-Nizam fi Dar‘a” [The ‘Settlement’ in Daraa Opens New Source of Revenue for the Regime in Daraa], *Enab Baladi*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/252391#ixzz6EKO0Q0Wr>. The state claimed to be providing 230,000–300,000 tons of flour for bakeries every day. That, however, was not enough to cover the local needs. See Walid al-Zu‘bi, “Mushkilet Ta‘min Raghif al-Kibz fi Dar‘a Tatafaqam wa La Hulul fi al-Ufuq Tukhafef min Mu‘anat al-

- Nas” [The Problem of Securing Bread in Daraa Worsens and No Solutions in Sight to Reduce Peoples’ Suffering], *Tishreen*, December 19, 2018, <http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=256867>. Despite a countrywide shortage, the government resumed providing schools in the south with heating fuel, illustrating the central government’s intent to resupply newly captured areas. See “Al-‘Audeh Allah: Tawzi’ 87,215 Litran min al-Mazout ‘ala Madares Muhafazat Dar’a” [Al-‘Audeh Allah: Distribution of 87,215 Liters of Fuel to Daraa Schools], Syrian Ministry of Education, February 15, 2020, <https://bit.ly/34A6axK>.
- 52 Author interview with a participant in negotiations with Russian representatives, Irbid, Jordan, March 14, 2020.
- 53 “‘Al-Banadoura’ Ba‘da an Tajawizat 1,000 Lira, Rubama Ta‘ud ila 100” [After the Price of Tomatoes Rose Above 1,000 Liras, It Might Return to 100], *Daraa 24*, May 8, 2020, <https://daraa24.org/tomato/>.
- 54 Muhamad Hamijo, “Muhamun Laja’u Libay’ al-Dukhan wa al-‘Amal fi al-Mazare’ li ‘Adm Wujud Mawred Lahom” [Lawyers Without Income Resort to Selling Cigarettes and Working in Fields], *Al-Watan Online*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.alwatanonline.com/المحامون-لجؤوا-لبيع-الدخان-والعمل-في-الم/>.
- 55 “The Syrian Government Refuses to Rehire Dismissed Employees in Northern Rural Homs, Contrary to Settlement Deal’s Terms,” Syrians for Trust and Justice, November 8, 2018, <https://stj-sy.org/en/942/>.
- 56 Author interview with a lawyer from Daraa, Amman, Jordan, December 15, 2020. The following source suggests that eighty lawyers were readmitted to the syndicate whereas the remaining 120 did not. See “Syria: The Bar Association Disbarred 170 Lawyers in Daraa,” Syrians for Truth and Justice, November 4, 2019, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-the-bar-association-disbarred-170-lawyers-in-daraa/>.
- 57 Author interview with a former Daraa municipality official, Irbid, Jordan, March 10, 2020.
- 58 Author interview with a participant in negotiations with Russian representatives, Irbid, March 14, 2020.
- 59 One resident said, “In Inkhil, the notables went to the Ninth Brigade in Al-Sanamayn and agreed over the details of the surrender to the regime. They didn’t even talk about the status of the fighters.” Author interview with a former Inkhil resident, Amman, Jordan, October 27, 2019.
- 60 Author interview with Syrian journalist currently residing in Amman, Jordan (via Skype), April 11, 2019.
- 61 Author interview with a former Daraa municipality official, Irbid, Jordan, March 10, 2020.
- 62 Author interview with a lawyer from Daraa, Irbid, Jordan, March 12, 2020.
- 63 Author interview with a native from the Yarmouq Valley who asked that the city where the interview took place in Jordan not be identified, March 12, 2020.
- 64 Author interview with a lawyer from Daraa, Amman, Jordan, October 27, 2019.
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