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Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria

**From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa  
Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel  
Behaviour During Negotiations**

Abdullah Al-Jabassini



European University Institute

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## **Abstract**

In June 2018, the Syrian Arab Army launched a military campaign that aimed at ending rebel rule and restoring territorial control over Daraa and Quneitra governorates southern Syria. This research presents a wide-range of developments that occurred in Daraa governorate after a Russian-brokered agreement that ended rebel rule. Based on exclusive interviews with senior ex-rebel and civilian actors, this study investigates how rebel leaders' behaviour at the negotiating table shaped Russia's level of commitment towards each former rebel leader as well as former rebels and civilians of their localities in the post-surrender era. Finally, this research identifies the main territorial configurations in Daraa governorate as well as the main challenges facing local institutions and service provision after the resurgence of state rule.

## **Keywords**

Syria, Daraa governorate, local reconciliation, rebel governance, rebel behaviour.





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## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

CMT	Crisis Management Team
FSP	Free Syrian Police
GoS	Government of Syria
IS	Islamic State
JAY	Jaysh Al-Yarmouk or Al-Yarmouk Army
JKBW	Jaysh Khalid bin al-Waleed or Khalid bin al-Waleed Army
MID	Military Intelligence Directorate
QSS	Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna or Youth of Sunna Forces
RMP	Russian Military Police
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
WH	White Helmets

## Executive Summary

In June 2018, the political and military dynamics of southern Syria once again dominated the headlines. The indiscriminate violence exhibited by the Syrian and Russian militaries against rebel-held<sup>1</sup> areas had forced rebel leaders to the negotiating table. Those negotiations were concluded with the rebels surrendering, marking an end to their rule in southern Syria. In return for this surrender, the rebels obtained several promises which Russia vowed to fulfil. At the same time, Western countries, which had been the leading donors in humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance in southern opposition-held areas, discontinued almost all of their funding and still needed to elaborate a strategy for the post-rebel rule era in Daraa. By tracing the sequence of events that began in June 2018, this research, in addition to evaluating post-surrender local configurations, concludes with the following findings:

First, the behaviour of former rebel leaders during the negotiations influenced the privileges that they, and the civilians in their localities, could obtain in a post-surrender era. The rebel leaders who secured the highest level of Russian commitment were those who showed genuine interest in Russia's mediation overtures, surrendered at the early stages of the talks, and maintained robust ties with their former fighters. Rebel leaders who defied Russia during the negotiations secured the lowest levels of Russian commitment. Uncertain and vacillating rebel leaders who later lost their capacity to mobilize their former fighters, or to compel them to fulfil their fighting duties elsewhere in Syria, secured short-term Russian commitment.

Second, based on the type of rebel behaviour, civilians either benefited from, or were disadvantaged by, the Russian commitment. Third, apart from its response to the variation in former rebel behaviour just described, Russia's vow to prevent armed clashes between Syrian military forces and former rebel groups was prioritised over other promises related to releasing detainees or improving local governance and institutions.

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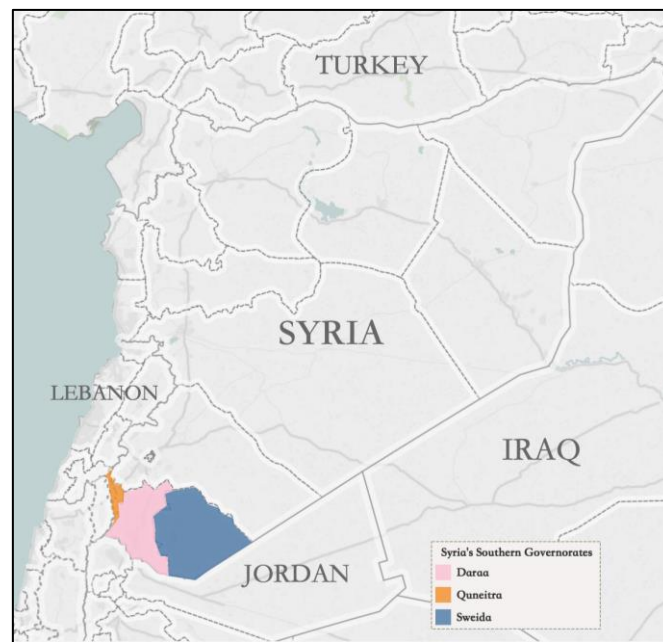
<sup>1</sup> In this study, I use the terms "rebels," "rebel organization," and "rebel group" interchangeably. According to Zachariah Mampilly "These are armed factions that use violence to challenge the state." See: Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 3



## Introduction<sup>\*o</sup>

In late April 2018, the political and military landscape of southern Syria's Daraa and Quneitra governorates took centre stage in Syria's continuing war as the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) regained control over territories in rural Damascus, particularly Eastern Ghouta and Eastern Qalamoun.<sup>2 3</sup> On June 13, Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, stated in an interview with the Iranian al-Alam TV: "[a]fter the liberation of al-Ghouta, it was suggested that we should move south."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, around mid-June 2018, the SAA as well as Russian warplanes began a series of fierce attacks on rebel strongholds in order to force the rebels to accept the negotiations that eventually concluded towards the end of July. These led to rebel surrender and restoration of state control over the region.

**Figure 1. Syria's Southern Governorates<sup>5</sup>**



*Source: Author*

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\* Abdullah Al-Jabassini is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the University of Kent. His doctorate research investigates the relationship between tribalism, rebel governance, and civil resistance to rebel organizations, with a focus on Daraa governorate, southern Syria. He is also a researcher for the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project at the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

<sup>o</sup> I'm extremely grateful to my PhD supervisor, Dr. Yvan Guichaoua, for his valuable feedback, comments, and advice. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Agnès Favier for her support, encouragement, and constructive comments, which were determinant for the production of this study.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the interviewees who graciously shared their knowledge throughout the time of writing this paper. This study would not have been completed without their contributions.

<sup>2</sup> Sputnik News, "Syrian Government Regains Control Over Eastern Ghouta," *Sputnik News*, April 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2UiLc0D>; Al-Jazeera, "Syria Government Advances as Rebels Evacuate Qalamoun Area," *Al-Jazeera*, April 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2JdToJp>.

<sup>3</sup> SAA managed to regain territorial control after a series of surrender agreements that followed indiscriminate violence and fierce attacks. Surrender deals involved reconciliation as well as the choice of rebel displacement to Idlib governorate, north-western Syria.

<sup>4</sup> Bashar al-Assad, President Assad's al-Alam TV Interview, June 13, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Sv0oX7>.

<sup>5</sup> While the data used to create all figures presented in this research were collected through personal communications, the author relied on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for the majority of geographical coordinates used in the figures. see: [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)

Regaining control over the last rebel-held territories in southern Syria was a political and military triumph for SAA. Control of the border with Jordan, particularly the strategic Nasib-Jaber crossing, will not only aid Syria's economic recovery but facilitate the normalization of Syria's relations with its regional neighbours. On the other side, the surrender of rebel organizations was tantamount to their defeat. The failure of the Syrian opposition to control the south meant a loss of its power to negotiate a political solution, and a further acceleration of its exclusion from Syria's local politics.

This research contributes to an aspect of post-conflict literature that needs further exploration, unpacking, and systematic theorization. By highlighting the importance of rebel behaviour during negotiations in Daraa, and its impact on post-surrender political and military configurations at the local and national levels, the present research offers insights into three aspects of the power/territory nexus. First, it traces the process of negotiations between the two Syrian warring parties and sheds light on the role of Russia. Russia, by gaining the increased role in local agreements in Syria it had had since 2016, was perceived, at least by the opposition, as the lead actor in the negotiations. It further draws links between the rebel leaders' behaviour during negotiations, the levels of Russian commitment to those negotiations, and the consequent fall-out in a post-surrender era. Second, it draws attention to the fate of local communities in Daraa—both civilian and those of former rebel actors—after the surrender deal. Third, it examines the resulting territorial configurations in southern Syria and therefore the changes brought about in actors and local governance.

The research here relies heavily on first-hand data collected through multiple rounds of semi-structured, and of narrative, interviews with a range of local actors in Daraa governorate that began in June and ended in December of 2018. It treats 'local actors' as encompassing ordinary civilians, former opposition officials, ex-rebel fighters, and local activists. The fieldwork for this paper also included exclusive talks with individuals who were present during preliminary talks over the surrender negotiations and during the negotiation talks themselves. Considering the current conditions in Daraa governorate, and in order to guarantee the safety of the interviewees, no names or exact locations are cited.<sup>6</sup>

## **1. Rebel Capitulation: Negotiating Under Fire**

What is the history of the rebel surrender in Daraa governorate southern Syria? How did Russia's 'carrot-and-stick' approach coerce rebels to come to the negotiating table? This section examines the history of the Russian-brokered talks in Daraa governorate between the opposition and the Government of Syria (GoS). It traces the development of military and political factors—both endogenous and exogenous—that coerced rebel leaders to come to the negotiating table in both the western and eastern regions of Daraa. It then explores the variation in rebel leaders' responses and behaviours towards the Russian delegation and the overall negotiations. This section concludes by revealing the unwritten list of Russian promises included in agreements reached between the rebels and the representatives of the Syrian state.

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewees have agreed to be quoted anonymously. The author obtained verbal consent from participants to publish the photos they provided.

### ***Rebel Surrender: ‘Winning the Heart and Mind’ of Russia***

Despite the ‘de-escalation zone’ agreement signed in May 2017,<sup>7</sup> Jordanian and Israeli fears about the presence of Iranian-backed militias on their borders,<sup>8</sup> and a statement issued by the US State Department on June 14, 2018 warning that the US would “take firm and appropriate measures” in response to Syrian military violations in the designated de-escalation zone in southern Syria,<sup>9</sup> the SAA, including the Tiger Forces,<sup>10</sup> were deployed to strategic areas of government-held territories in the Daraa and Sweida governorates. This followed GoS calls for ‘reconciliation’ using leaflets dropped by Syrian warplanes.

Around mid-June 2018, the SAA launched a large-scale military offensive on rebel strongholds in Daraa governorate (see Figure 2.) Between June 15 and June 20, the SAA’s attacks increased significantly. Artillery and missile strikes targeted localities in northern Daraa governorate such as al-Harra, Akraba, and Kafr Shams, while warplanes carried out a series of aerial attacks and bombardments on Busr al-Harir, Nahta, and villages located in al-Lajat, an area in the north-eastern part of the governorate.<sup>11</sup> Russia, which acted as a guarantor of the ‘de-escalation zone’, chose to join the SAA’s military campaign. Russian warplanes carried out intense air strikes on localities in the eastern region of Daraa on June 24, 2018. Russia’s aerial bombardments at a time when its military officials had suggested giving ‘reconciliation’ a chance,<sup>12</sup> indicates its use of a ‘carrot-and-stick’ approach. Indeed, the strategy was effective in pushing rebel leaders to the negotiating table.

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<sup>7</sup> Warsaw Institute, “De-Escalation Zones: Russian Treason in Syria,” *Warsaw Institute* (blog), August 16, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2L6p5EX>. The ‘De-Escalation Zone’ treaty was signed between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, in which the three states pledged to guarantee relative peace in several regions in Syria, including Daraa. Later in July 2017, Russia, the US, and Jordan reached a cease-fire deal in southern Syria.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, “Jordan Confident Russia Will Preserve Southern Syria Truce,” *Reuters*, May 28, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2StBya0>

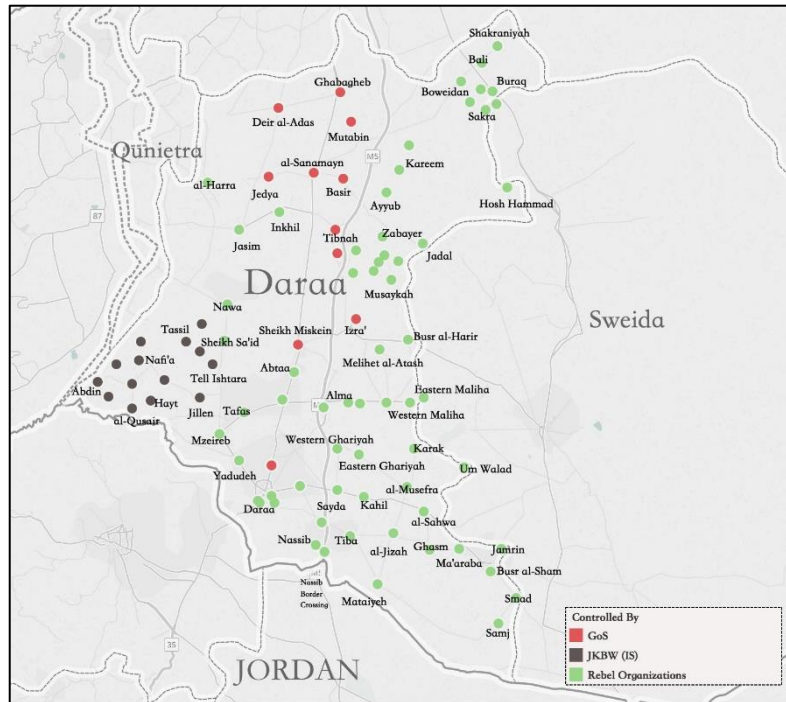
<sup>9</sup> Bernadan O’Brien, “U.S. to Take ‘Firm, Appropriate Measures’ Against Syria Violations,” *Reuters*, June 15, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2rjn3Ks>.

<sup>10</sup> Tiger Forces, or *Quwwat Al-Nimr* (قوات النمر) is a special forces unit of the Syrian Arab Army led by Brigadier General Suheil Al-Hassan. The Tiger Forces are described as “Russia’s Partner Force.” See for example: <https://international-review.org/tiger-forces-part-4-russias-partner-force/>

<sup>11</sup> Series of interviews with local activists, Daraa governorate, July-October 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Stated by Assad in his interview with Al-Alam TV personnel. See: Bashar al-Assad, President Assad’s Al-Alam TV Interview, June 13, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Sv0oX7>.

**Figure 2. Territorial Control in Daraa Governorate<sup>13</sup>**  
As of June 2018



Source: Author

Under conditions such as this of indiscriminate violence, on June 20, 2018, multiple rebel “operations rooms”<sup>14</sup> determined to establish what they called the “Central Military Operations Room” in order to organize their military efforts and confront the military campaign in Daraa and Quneitra governorates.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, a message sent from Washington to the rebel leaders of the “Southern Front”<sup>16</sup> four days later changed their calculations. Reuters, which saw a copy of the message, reported that it included the following specific directive: “You should not base your decisions on the assumption or expectation of a military intervention by us.”<sup>17</sup>

Rebel leaders consequently felt let down by one of the key states that had acted as their external patron since 2014.<sup>18</sup> The US, which had started to ratchet down its support for the Southern Front earlier by halting funds around July 2017,<sup>19</sup> was not willing to assist efforts to repel a Russian-backed Syrian

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>14</sup> Seven operations rooms joined to form the Central Military Operations Room in southern Syria. These were: Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous البنيان المرصوص, Ras Al-Sufouf رصن الصفوف, Tawheed Al-Sufouf توحيد الصفوف, Sadh Al-Ghuzat صد الغزاة, Muthallath Al-Mawt مثلث الموت, Al-Nasr Al-Moubien النصر المبين, and Sadh Al-Bughat صد البغاة operation rooms.

<sup>15</sup> Nedaa Syria, “Central Military Operations Room in South of Syria,” *Nedaa Syria*, June 20, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2BRJUmI>.

<sup>16</sup> The Southern Front is a Syrian rebel alliance established in February 2014 to consolidate the command structure and military operations of more than 50 rebel groups. The Southern Front was active in southern Syria, primarily in Daraa and Quneitra governorates, and received funds from the US, UK, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan.

<sup>17</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Syrian Rebels Say U.S. Won’t Intervene in South Syria,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2RyITG7>.

<sup>18</sup> Fox News, “US-Backed Syria Rebels Make New Push South of Damascus,” March 24, 2015, <https://fxn.ws/2T1baEA>.

<sup>19</sup> The US stopped funding the Southern Front after the cease-fire agreement was reached with Russia and Jordan on July 7, 2017.



government offensive. Hence, the majority of rebel leaders concluded that sitting at the negotiating table was unavoidable. “At that time, they [rebel leaders] had no other choice but to accept the Russian offer for negotiations, especially that all their supporters [external states] have ditched them . . . one [rebel] whispered to the one next to him: ‘we must accept; Russians and the regime can turn us into dust in no time’.”<sup>20</sup> This was recounted to the author by a local activist, recalling the conversation at one of the meetings between rebel figures in June. At that time, the SAA was advancing within Daraa. On June 26, 2018, and through a series of fierce military attacks, the SAA seized control over the strategic localities of Busr al-Harir and Melihat al-Atash.<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> When the Army reached the outskirts of the town of al-Musefra, the urgent need for negotiations became clear to rebel leaders.

Behind the scenes in late June 2018, rebel leaders were consulting with local populations on whether they should engage in Russian-sponsored talks with the Syrian regime or repel the SAA by force. The majority of the leaders viewed Russia as a part of a military campaign aimed at forcing them to the negotiating table, and the outcome of these negotiations was known in advance to be in favour of the Syrian regime. Yet their willingness to engage with Russian mediation stemmed from their distrust of the Syrian state. In fact, a segment of civilians—particularly those who recalled the recent scenario of Eastern Ghouta and the civilian evacuation to Idlib—supported the option of talks with the Syrian regime and demanded the Russian presence as a guarantor.

One civilian in Daraa later recounted the motivation driving engagement in Russian-brokered talks: “We had no choice. No one else had the chance of sitting with the Russians at the same table before. . . . Apparently everyone agreed that Assad would remain in power, and that he would, sooner or later, regain every metre back in Syria under his control. . . . For me as a civilian, I did not want to be forced to leave my home like people from Ghouta were forced to . . . So, why not invest in the Russian offer if they are asking us for negotiations?”<sup>23</sup>

In the town of Busra al-Sham, Ahmad Al-Oda, the head of the *Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna* (QSS, or Youth of Sunna Forces) rebel group,<sup>24</sup> met in late June 2018 with tribal notables from the town and discussed the options of accepting negotiations or declaring a public mobilization. One man who attended that meeting recounted the message given to Al-Oda by the elders: “You are the field commander. Be rational and decide, and we will support you. If one day you will favour your personal interests over the public ones, we will stand against you.”<sup>25</sup>

Soon after, the first meeting between Daraa rebel leaders and Syrian regime representatives took place at the Nasib border crossing. At this meeting, rebel leaders Ahmad Al-Oda, Bashar Al-Zu’bi, the leader of *Jaysh Al-Yarmouk* (JAY, or Al-Yarmouk Army),<sup>26</sup> Abo Omar Zaghoul, the leader of *Firqat Osoud Al-Sunna* (or, Lions of Sunna Division)<sup>27</sup> and Jihad Al-Masalmeh, head of the *Al-Bunyan Al-*

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with local activist, Daraa governorate, September 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with local activist, eastern region of Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Controlling these localities, especially Busr al-Harir, allowed the SAA to isolate the Al-Lajat region in the north-east of Daraa governorate, and cut any supply lines to the eastern region of Daraa as a whole.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a male participant, Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>24</sup> *Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna* (QSS, or Youth of Sunna Forces قوات شباب السنة) formerly known as *Firqat Shabab Al-Sunna* (or, Youth of Sunna Division فرقة شباب السنة) and *Liwa Shabab Al-Sunna* (or, Youth of Sunna Brigade لواء شباب السنة) was a rebel group that emerged in 2013, operated in Daraa governorate and later became part of the Southern Front.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with male participant who attended the meeting, eastern region of Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>26</sup> *Jaysh Al-Yarmouk* (JAY, or Al-Yarmouk Army جيش اليرموك) was one of the largest Syrian rebel groups that emerged and operated in Daraa governorate. The group joined the Southern Front and operated mainly in the eastern region of Daraa governorate.

<sup>27</sup> *Firqat Osoud Al-Sunna* (or, Lions of Sunna Division فرقة أسود السنة) was a Syrian rebel group that joined the Southern Front in 2014, and later joined Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous operations room in December 2015.

*Marsous* operation room<sup>28</sup> met with Russian officers and Kinana Huweija,<sup>29</sup> a representative of the Syrian regime with no official state position or government portfolio. The Syrian regime put forward its central demand: reopen the border crossing and in return, forces loyal to the regime would stop their military attacks on rebel-held areas in Daraa. The meeting concluded with the delegates representing the rebels agreeing to reopen the crossing but as there was no agreement on who would manage it, the talks failed. During the meeting, rebel leaders had insisted on assigning their representatives to operate Nasib, not allowing the raising of the Syrian flag, maintaining control over an area of roads from Nasib to the town of Khirbet Ghazaleh, and keeping a specific percentage from the border crossing's revenues. These requests were flatly denied by the Syrian regime representative and hence the SAA campaign continued.<sup>30</sup>

Rebel leaders were forced to lower their expectations and demands, and requested another meeting shortly after with the Russian officers and Kinana Huweija. Huweija, the regime representative, asked rebel leaders to enter Khirbet Ghazaleh, a town controlled by the GoS. Rebel leaders rejected the request to negotiate in a GoS-held area and invited Russian generals and representatives of the GoS to hold talks in the town of Busra al-Sham. This was agreed to and Busra al-Sham would then go on to host a series of Russian-sponsored talks between the combatants.

On June 30, 2018, the Russian delegation entered Busra al-Sham from the town of Barad in eastern Sweida governorate. It met with Ahmad Al-Oda, Bashar Al-Zu'bi, Adham Al-Akrad, the leader of the *Fawj Al-Handasa wa Al-Sawarekh* (or, Engineering and Missiles Regiment),<sup>31</sup> and Mahmoud Murshid Al-Baradan (aka Abu Murshid Al-Baradan), the leader of *Jaysh Al-Mu'taz B'Allah* (or, Al-Mu'taz B'Allah Army).<sup>32</sup> Al-Akrad and Al-Baradan acted as representatives of several rebel groups in the western and centre regions of Daraa. Among the four rebels, three chief patterns of behaviour emerged towards Russian-mediated talks, patterns that would shape the Russian level of commitment towards their localities in the post-surrender epoch.

In the course of my research, I was able to differentiate these as aggregates of the following characteristics: genuine and reliable, exhibited by Al-Oda; parochial and vacillating as exhibited by Al-Baradan, and defiant and a potential spoiler as exhibited by Al-Zu'bi and Al-Akrad. Based on first-hand data collected through exclusive interviews with civilian and former rebel figures close to these rebel leaders, *Table (1)* summarizes the behaviour-based assessments of the now former rebel leaders who took part in the negotiations, and the gains/losses of each behaviour.

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<sup>28</sup> Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous Operation Room (غرفة عمليات البنيان المرصوص) was established in December 2015 by around 20 rebel organizations in Daraa governorate after their failure in the battle of "Southern Storm" (معركة عاصفة الجنوب).

<sup>29</sup> Kinana Huweija, the daughter of the former Brigadier General, Adib Huweija, has worked as an anchor-woman on several Syrian T.V channels. She is often described as "a delegate from the Ministry of Reconciliation" headed by Ali Haidar. She was involved in local agreements and negotiations in al-Muadhmiyah in 2015, Daraya, Khan al-Sheikh and Wadi Barada in 2016, and Homs northern Suburbs in 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with local activist, western region of Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>31</sup> *Fawj Al-Handasa wa Al-Sawarekh* (or, Engineering and Missiles Regiment (فوج الهندسة والصواريخ) was a rebel group that was part of *Firqat Salah Al-Din* (or, Salah Al-Din Division (فرقة صلاح الدين) which formed part of the Southern Front and operated in Daraa governorate. The group then became one of 20 rebel actors that joined to form the Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous Operation Room in December 2015. The regiment was known to locally manufacture missiles with high destructive power such as "Omar" and "Abu Bakir".

<sup>32</sup> *Jaysh Al-Mu'taz B'Allah* (or, Al-Mu'taz B'Allah Army (جيش المعتز بالله) formerly known as *Liwa' Al-Mu'taz B'Allah* (or, Al-Mu'taz B'Allah Brigade (لواء المعتز بالله) was one of the earliest rebel groups that emerged in Daraa governorate. The group was one of five rebel groups that formed the *Jaysh Al-Thawra* (or, Army of the Revolution (جيش الثورة) in December 2016.

Former Rebel Leader	Ex-Rebel Organization	Behaviour-based Assessment	Russian Protection	Russian Patronage	Extent of GoS's Punitive Action
 <p><b>Ahmad Al-Oda</b> أحمد العودة</p>	<p>Youth of Sunna Forces قوات شباب السنّة</p>	<p>Genuine and reliable (prompt surrender, high mobilization capacities)</p>	<p>Full</p>	<p>Long term</p>	<p>Limited</p>
 <p><b>Mahmoud Murshid Al-Baradan</b> (AKA Abu Murshid Al-Baradan) محمود مرشد البردان (أبو مرشد البردان)</p>	<p>Al-Mu'taz B'Allah Army (constituent of Al-Thawra Army) جيش المعتز بالله (جيش الثورة)</p>	<p>Confused and uncertain (showed vacillation during negotiations, late surrender, low mobilization capacities)</p>	<p>Short-term <i>Until Mid-October 2018</i></p>	<p>Short-term <i>Until Mid-October 2018</i></p>	<p>Short-term limitation <i>Until Mid-October 2018</i></p>
 <p><b>Bashar Al-Zu'bi</b> بشار الزعبي</p>	<p>Al-Yarmouk Army جيش اليرموك</p>	<p>Not reliable Potential Spoiler (exhibited signs of defiance)</p>	<p>No protection/ Exclusion from local politics</p>	<p>Non-existent</p>	<p>Not limited</p>
 <p><b>Adham Al-Akrad</b> أدهم الأكراد</p>	<p>Engineering and Missiles Regiment (constituent of Al-Bunyan Al-Marsous Operation Room) فوج الهندسة والصواريخ (غرفة عمليات البنيان المرصوص)</p>	<p>Not reliable Potential spoiler (exhibited signs of defiance)</p>	<p>No protection/ Exclusion from local politics</p>	<p>Non-existent</p>	<p>Not limited</p>

While talks were being held on June 30, 2018, the SAA's military operations were ongoing, and the SAA claimed to have captured the town of al-Musefra. The opposition refused to negotiate while the SAA was using force to advance and threatened to withdraw from the table. The Russian delegation intervened and, as a good faith initiative, mediated an agreement with the SAA to stop its military campaign until a settlement was reached.

Up to this point, rebel leaders were having to operate under pressure from above and from below and their situation was now critical. From above, Russia's support for the SAA had, in the most recent SAA-led campaign, facilitated the restoration of state control in Ghouta. Rebels thus believed that Russia would be willing to create a similar scenario in Daraa. From below, they faced declining popular support for their organizations: they had been unable to secure civilians from indiscriminate violence and a general state of distress and dissatisfaction existed with the fragile and collapsing rebel governance that was no longer meeting their needs. While some leaders were fluctuating between resistance and surrender, others were considering what seemed to be the only choice for an 'honourable exit' in the eyes of the populace: show good intentions (i.e., to end the conflict), hold in check their political expectations, and obtain guarantees to secure civilians from state retaliation in the future. For many, trusting Russia was eventually deemed a necessary evil.

### ***Rebel Behaviour, Demands, and Final Outcomes of the Negotiations***

In the beginning of July 2018, a new series of negotiations took place between the state representatives (including Kinana Huweija; officers from the SAA, in particular senior military officers from the 4<sup>th</sup> Division<sup>33</sup>; and the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate [MID] <sup>34</sup> in Daraa), Russian officers and Al-Oda, Al-Akrad, Al-Baradan and Al-Zu'bi rebel leaders. Rebel leaders demanded the withdrawal of the SAA from the localities seized after the launch of the June 2018 military campaign, including the areas of Busr al-Harir, al-Musefra, Eastern Ghariyah, Western Ghariyah, and Nahta. Moreover, rebel leaders demanded the release of detainees and prisoners, and rejected the forced displacement of any rebel or civilian from Daraa. On the other side, the state representatives demanded that rebels surrender their heavy weapons, that they allow the entry of civil police into rebel areas, and that they hand over control of Daraa city and the Nasib border crossing to the GoS. Because rebel leaders were hesitant about surrendering heavy armaments, talks failed again.

The issue of surrendering heavy armaments was the first and most important point of divergence in the behaviours of rebel leaders, one that allowed Russia to refine its intentions. Towards the end of June, Adham al-Akrad defied the Russian delegation and attempted to reactivate the dormant rebellion, getting to his feet and yelling in the middle of a meeting that took place early in the talks: "Moscow may fall, but Daraa will never fall."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, on June 30, 2018, Bashar Al-Zu'bi withdrew from the meeting and appeared in a short video rejecting the negotiations. He argued that the talks were demanding "surrender and humiliation"; that this "will never happen in *Hawran*. Either we die in dignity, or we live in dignity" he said.<sup>36</sup> The Russian delegation prepared to leave and promised a decisive battle shortly.

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<sup>33</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division (الفرقة الرابعة) is an elite unit in the SAA. It was formed in 1984 from the remnants of the defence companies that were dismantled after Rifa'at Al-Assad's failed coup attempt against his brother President Hafez Al-Assad. Today, the division is led by Major General Maher Al-Assad, Bashar Al-Assad's brother.

<sup>34</sup> Military Intelligence Directorate (or, *Shu'bat al-Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya* شعبية الأمن العسكري) is one of the principle intelligence apparatuses operating in Syria, and is linked to the Ministry of Defence.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with local activist, eastern region of Daraa governorate, November 2018. Al-Akrad was referring to Daraa city and not to the whole governorate.

<sup>36</sup> Video obtained during an interview with a local activist, eastern region of Daraa governorate, November 2018). Also available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhgSOX6ZmfA>

“While they [Russian delegation] were leaving, just within 15 minutes, more than 44 air strikes were conducted on areas of Sayda, Kahil, and later the SAA advanced in Sayda, Nai’ma, and al-Jizah.”<sup>37</sup>

The Russian ‘scorched-earth’ policy had a logic to it. As noted by professor Stathis Kalyvas, the use of indiscriminate violence can be a strategy to control, rather than simply to displace or eliminate, a population.<sup>38</sup> Violence perpetrated against civilians had provoked them to appeal to rebel groups to get back to the negotiating table. “IDPs [internally displaced persons] felt danger as bombing was getting closer to them, and shrapnel reached their areas and injured many of them. Facing the closed Jordanian borders, they started to appeal to rebels to surrender,” said one civilian living in a village near Jordanian borders.<sup>39</sup>

Immediately, rebel leaders were forced back to the negotiating table. On July 1, 2018, Bashar Al-Zu’bi, who had been attempting to generate public support for armed resistance, returned to negotiations. “Yesterday you were spreading videos calling for public mobilization, and today you are sitting with us at the table. What happened?” one of the Russian officers reportedly mocked him.<sup>40</sup> At this point, the Russian side deemed two prominent rebel leaders unqualified as negotiating partners. For Russia, Al-Zu’bi and Al-Akrad had shown a suspicious level of defiance, one that signalled the possibility of a shift to ‘spoiler’.

In fact, on that day, Ahmad Al-Oda, the leader of the QSS, had abruptly accepted the Russian settlement and begun to hand QSS’s heavy weaponry over to the Russian Military Police (RMP).

#### **Ahmad Al-Oda, the head of Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna Rebel Group Escorting Russian Officers in Busra al-Sham town in Daraa Governorate**



*Source: Photo credit: anonymous photographer, reproduced with permission.*

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with a male participant, eastern region of Daraa governorate, July 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a male participant, eastern region of Daraa governorate, August 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with a local figure who witnessed the incident, eastern region of Daraa governorate, November 2018.

He saw in Russian mediation an investment for prospective gain and a chance to prevent a civilian entity, the Crisis Management Team (CMT), from gaining the upper hand and becoming the primary opposition actor in negotiations.<sup>41</sup> Soon after, Al-Oda would also offer Russia his services to fight IS under the command of the Russian-led 5<sup>th</sup> Corps<sup>42</sup> whenever and wherever needed, a move that was appreciated by the Russian delegation.<sup>43</sup>

On the next day, July 2, negotiations continued between the Russian delegation, rebel leaders, regime representative Kinana Huweija, officers from the SAA (including senior military officers from the 4<sup>th</sup> Division), and the head of the MID in Daraa. On July 6, 2018, a settlement on the eastern region was reached. The agreement stipulated: (1) surrender of the rebel groups' heavy armaments to the Russian Military Police (RMP); (2) RMP freedom to patrol Daraa localities; (3) withdrawal of the SAA from al-Jizah, Kahil, al-Sahwa, and al-Musefra (see Figure 3.); and (4) reopen of the Nasib border-crossing by the GoS and its assumption of control over the entirety of the border with Jordan.

Following Al-Oda's path, Al-Baradan accepted the negotiations in the western region of Daraa on July 7, 2018, one day after finalization of the agreement in the eastern region. Negotiations took place between the Syrian state representative, and Abu Murshid Al-Baradan and Shadi Sarhan, in the town of Tafas.<sup>44</sup> Al-Baradan became the *de facto* negotiator of the western region of Daraa as it was his rebel organization, Al-Mu'taz B'Allah Army, that had been most present on the frontlines facing *Jaysh Khalid bin Al-Waleed* (JKBW)<sup>45</sup>, an Islamic State (IS) affiliate, in the Al-Yarmouk Basin area. The agreement reached around mid-July 2018 included the four previous articles of the eastern region and one more. Article (5) stipulated that the SAA carry out military operations against JKBW over agricultural roads without entering any of the cities, towns, or villages in the western region of Daraa.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The Crisis Management Team (CMT) in Daraa emerged towards the end of June 2018. The team was composed of tribal elders and civilian and rebel delegates; the CMT claimed it was cooperating with the leadership of several armed factions in order to reach decisions with the negotiators. The civilian-led CMT authorized many representatives from the opposition such as the Free Daraa Provincial Council, the Syrian Interim Government, the Free Lawyers' Syndicate, local councils, and other prominent civilian tribal figures to coordinate amongst the various political and military actors involved in Daraa, in preparation for negotiations with the Syrian regime. On July 2, 2018, the CMT announced their withdrawal from negotiations with the Russian delegation and called for a popular mobilization to repel the SAA.

<sup>42</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Corps – Assault, is an SAA military unit, the formation of which was declared by the Syrian Ministry of Defence on November 22, 2016. The 5<sup>th</sup> Corps operates under the supervision of Russian military officers. After local agreements and rebel surrender, some evacuated to Idlib. For other ex-rebels and male civilians whose names were on a government-issued "wanted list", joining the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps became widespread: performing their mandatory or reserve military service would allow them, to avoid security prosecutions and arrests. In Daraa, the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps competed with the SAA 4<sup>th</sup> Division to attract defeated rebels. A 5<sup>th</sup> Corps fighter receives between \$150 and \$250 as a monthly salary as well as a label that shields him from government detention.

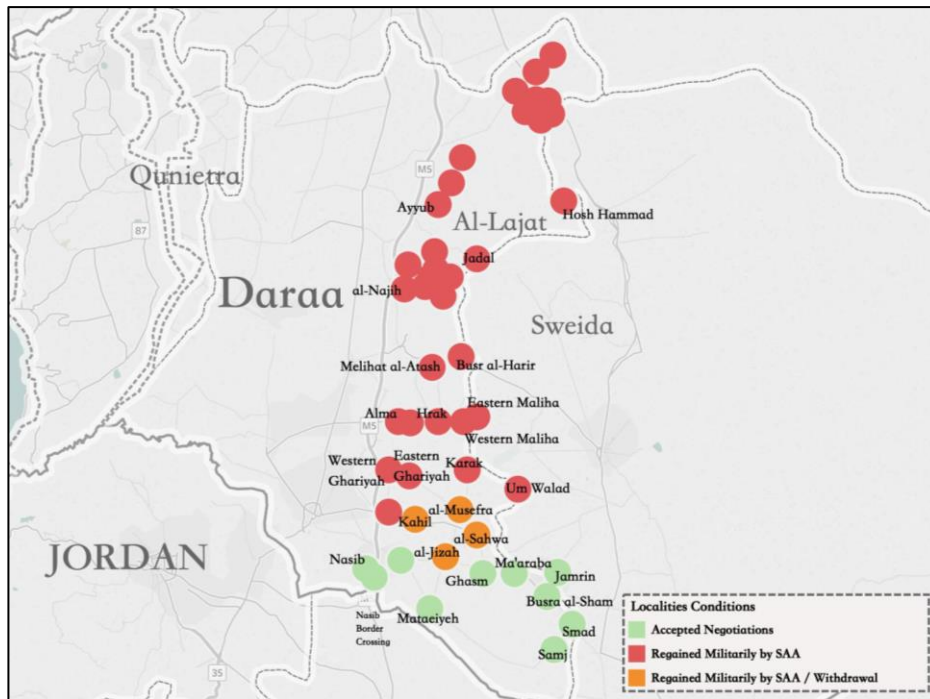
<sup>43</sup> Interview with a male participant, western region of Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Shadi Sarhan is a former reporter, local activist, and unarmed member of *Jaysh Al-Thawra* (The Revolution's Army) rebel organization.

<sup>45</sup> *Jaysh Khalid bin Al-Waleed* (or, Khalid bin Al-Waleed Army جيش خالد بن الوليد) is an IS-linked Syrian rebel organization that was formed on May 21, 2016 by the merger of *Liwa Shuhada' Al-Yarmouk* (or, Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade لواء شهداء اليرموك), *Harakat Al-Muthanna Al-Islamiya* (or, The Islamic Muthanna Movement حركة المثني الإسلامية) and *Jaysh Al-Jihad* (or, The Army of Jihad جيش الجهاد) and was based principally in Al-Yarmouk Basin (حوض اليرموك) in Daraa governorate.

<sup>46</sup> All articles of the agreement are sourced from a series of interviews with local figures who attended the series of talks in the towns of Busra al-Sham and Tafas, Daraa governorate, October 2018.

**Figure 3. Localities in Eastern Region of Daraa Governorate<sup>47</sup>**  
As of July 6, 2018



Source: Author

At this point, some rebels, chiefly those who operated in Daraa city, demanded they be evacuated to Idlib. It is worth noting that the Russian delegation challenged two principle demands put forward by the opposition during the negotiations. The first was retention of the headquarters of the White Helmet (WH) organization in Daraa. The second was the evacuation of civilians and rebels to Idlib. While, in negotiations, Russia refused point blank to consider any demand initiated by civil entities concerning the WH's potential role in Daraa (Russia accuses them of faking chemical attacks in Syria including the August 2013 attack in Eastern Ghouta), it had to accept the demand for evacuation later on.

From the Russian point of view, there was no need to transfer individuals to Idlib as Syria's northwest region was targeted as the next battlefield: "There is no need for you to go there," Russians told their interlocutors, according to local activists present at the talks, "a big bloody battle will take place there soon,"<sup>48</sup>. But after the Russians approved finalization of the talks, preparations to remove the first batch of displaced people, those who rejected the settlement and the 'reconciliation', took place on July 15, 2018. Of the five batches of displacements to Idlib, the last was completed on August 12, 2018.<sup>49</sup> Local activists estimate the number of IDPs evacuated from Daraa to northwest Syria to be roughly 15,000 (about 5,000 rebels and 10,000 civilians).<sup>50</sup>

Following rebel capitulation, the final stages of negotiations were concluded with a verbal agreement: Russia vowed to commit to the deal's articles, and to guarantee their fulfilment by the GoS. In principle, the Russian commitment was the same for all Daraa localities; fulfilment of these promises,

<sup>47</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>48</sup> Series of interviews with local figures who attended the talks in the town of Busra al-Sham, Daraa governorate, September 2018).

<sup>49</sup> Series of interviews with local activists, Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Series of interviews with local activists, Daraa governorate, November 2018.

however varied according to the behaviour of each rebel group's leadership during negotiations and each rebel leader's ability to preserve robust ties with his former combatants. The Russian delegation guaranteed: (1) the release of all detainees from Daraa and Quneitra provinces; (2) the return of all IDPs to their localities in Daraa, particularly those who left due to the military campaign launched in June 2018; (3) the return of civil government institutions to reconciliation areas in order to provide essential services in southern Syria; (4) settlement of the status of individuals including civilians and military defectors, deserters and draft dodgers through a reconciliation process that guaranteed the safety and security of all; (5) incorporation of ex-rebels into the Russian-led 5<sup>th</sup> Corps and a commitment to fight ISIS whenever needed; (6) ability of all dismissed government employees to return to their jobs; (7) prevention of the establishment of headquarters affiliated with Iran or Lebanese Hezbollah in reconciliation areas, and (8) amalgamation of local government and opposition councils into a joint body.<sup>51</sup>

In the case of Daraa, Russia appears to have played a larger role in shepherding the local agreement than it had in such agreements elsewhere in Syria between 2016 and 2017.<sup>52</sup> Russia's preference to negotiate with rebels rather than with civilian opposition figures elevated the former and side-lined the latter. As a result, rebel actors monopolized the representation and decision making in their areas and ultimately took the upper hand on the opposition's side in the negotiations. This was observed to be the case for agreements reached in 2018 in Eastern Ghouta and North Homs; and Daraa was no exception.

In Daraa, Russia is viewed as the principle actor facilitating termination of rebel rule. The rebel leader who valued the Russian offer, rushed to profit from Russia's intervention in the early stages of the negotiations, and then showed constant commitment and readiness to fight under Russian leadership was the one who achieved the most in terms of post-surrender gains. This was Al-Oda, the only leader to follow that path, who was a "saviour" in the eyes of his former fighters and civilians, and who was known as "Moscow's man" in Daraa. In contrast, rebel leaders who showed no genuine interest in the Russian role, and who signalled defiance, represented an unnecessary investment for Russia. The stripping of their power was a certainty. Russia's response was simply to stand by later, as those who had fought under Al-Akrad and Al-Zu'bi, as well as the civilians who lived in their areas, were subject to detention at SAA checkpoints or arrested by state security agencies.

In a 'grey zone' between these two types lay a third: those rebel leaders who showed uncertainty and vacillation during negotiations, who wavered between opinions and actions that led to a relatively late surrender, and who lost ties with their former combatants. That these leaders lost influence over their former fighters is evident in their inability to mobilize them again to fight elsewhere in Syria, despite commitments to do so. Al-Baradan is an example who was eventually abandoned by Russia. These rebel leaders, their former fighters, and civilians living in their localities, automatically lost Russia's favour.

## 2. Transition from Within: Civilians' Status and the Fate of Ex-Rebel Actors

In a post-surrender era, security is central to the transition from rebellion to uncontested state rule. And key to an identification of security challenges for governments, ex-rebels, and civilians alike is the status of both civilian and ex-rebel actors. As discussed below, status will be seen to be a matter of affiliation, allegiance, acceptance and chance. The GoS has promised to implement a 'reconciliation procedure' within which both the civilians and ex-rebels who comply with its requirements will be ensured security and safety. Apart from evacuation to Idlib, civilians seem to have no other choice but to adapt to the new political configuration and make their way through the government-sponsored process. The fate of

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<sup>51</sup> Articles of the guarantee were obtained through a series of interviews with local activists, western region of Daraa governorate, October-November 2018.

<sup>52</sup> On Local agreements between 2016 and 2017, see: Fadi Adleh and Agnès Favier, *Local Reconciliation Agreements' in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding*, Middle East Directions (MED), 2017/1, 2017, available on: <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/46864>.



ex-combatants, on the other hand, is highly dependent on the choices and behaviours of their former rebel leaders, as has just been discussed. While many ex-rebel leaders were successful in consolidating a minimum of independence and power vis-à-vis the state by integrating into the Russian-backed and supervised 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, others failed and were subject to retaliation, or integrated into other Syrian military divisions not benefiting from Russian patronage.

Before delving into the status of civilians and the fate of ex-rebel actors, it is crucial to outline the procedure entailed in the government's 'reconciliation.' As part of the final agreement, both civilians and combatants in Daraa governorate had the choice to go through this government promoted process, allegedly to guarantee their own security. Governmental convoys associated with the MID would enter Daraa hamlets for about three days. Individuals who had previously demonstrated their disloyalty to Syrian authorities in ways such as attending demonstrations, evading military service, defecting, or joining a rebel group were given an opportunity to 'reconcile their status.' Those who wished to do so were to approach the convoy's headquarters with a personal photo and an ID card. An officer responsible for filling in a 12-question form was to ask about one's activities and relations with rebels since 2011, then request the respondent to sign a "pledge document" in which he or she "vows not to carry out any activities that harm the internal or the external security of the Syrian Arab Republic."<sup>53</sup> The individual would return in a period of five to ten days to obtain a form signed and stamped by the head of the MID. The form was to indicate that one's name had been removed from an official state list of wanted people and allow the bearer to move through checkpoints without being harassed or arrested.<sup>54</sup> "I have 'reconciled my status' and obtained that paper . . . this paper allowed me to go to Damascus without any issues on the way. I do not know why, to be honest, but I am afraid that this paper can turn into a useless piece of paper at any checkpoint,"<sup>55</sup> said one man who had completed the reconciliation procedure.

### ***The Fate of Rebel Actors***

The fate of surrendered rebels as well as of military deserters, defectors, and draft evaders was an important matter discussed throughout negotiations; it required compromise and a guarantee that its terms would be fulfilled by the Syrian state. The opposition's request to involve international observers in the issue was turned down by the international actors themselves. After being approached and consulted by rebel leaders, Jordan and Saudi Arabia rejected the opposition's appeal in June 2018 and advised the rebel leader of the Southern Front to deal solely with the Russian delegation since the "Syrian case is not a priority on their agendas anymore."<sup>56</sup>

During negotiations, the Russians offered ex-rebels the chance to join the Russian-supervised, trained, and equipped 5<sup>th</sup> Corps and promised to guarantee the opportunity. All rebel leaders, with the exception of those who demanded evacuation, immediately accepted the offer since doing so would shield them from arrest by, or harm from, the government's forces. The new faction first agreed to recruit 1500 ex-rebels from the eastern region of Daraa and 1,000 from the western region<sup>57</sup> but excluded rebels from the central region of Daraa as they had demanded evacuation to Idlib. Reports indicated that the number of the brigade's combatants would increase to 3,500 at the beginning of 2019.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Reconciliation forms were obtained by the author.

<sup>54</sup> The procedure was explained to the author by multiple individuals who went through the reconciliation process in Daraa governorate.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with a male participant, western region of Daraa governorate, November 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a former rebel, eastern region of Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that ex-rebels of QSS and a few ex-members of JAY rebel organizations comprise the backbone of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps in the south. Interviews with 5<sup>th</sup> Corps fighters indicated that the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps in Daraa were deployed and fought IS in Deir Ez-Zor in December 2018. Previously, Ahmad Al-Oda was able to mobilize 800 combatants and divided them into two groups of 400 fighters that he organized to fight IS in Syrian Badia alternately, each for 20 days.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a former rebel who joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, Daraa governorate, November 2018.

In mid-September 2018, Russia dissolved the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps in the western region of Daraa as the new members refused to fight alongside the SAA in battles planned for Idlib. The GoS then ordered the reactivation of lists of former rebels that had been compiled as part of its policing and surveillance. Anybody on those lists would be stopped and searched at checkpoints and then subject to draft into regular mandatory active and reserve military service. Because the reactivation carried with it the prospect of former rebels being recruited and stationed across the country, 200 of them immediately signed on to the 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the SAA, which would allow them to remain posted within the Daraa governorate.<sup>59</sup> Rather than join the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, former rebel leader Abu Murshid Al-Baradan, in the western Daraa region, proposed in late September 2018 the creation of a security apparatus that would be directly under the command of Russian forces in Hmeimim, the coastal Russian air base. Russia reluctantly accepted the suggestion in early October 2018 on the condition that new recruits join the fight against IS in the neighbouring governorate of Sweida.

Around mid-October, Russia reneged, aware that empowering Al-Baradan would be a losing deal since he had lost credibility in the eyes of former rebels in the western region of Daraa, particularly after Russia had dissolved the portion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps that had been operating there. Al-Baradan “was always hesitant, lost, did not know what he wanted, and did not seem reliable or useful to anyone, not even to the regime . . . he was good at suggesting haphazard plans all the time. Russians were actually bored with him at the end, especially since he failed to recruit fighters to go to Idlib, and their last promise to him [regarding the creation of a security apparatus] was an ‘anaesthesia,’ an ex-combatant who interacted closely with Al-Baradan stated.<sup>60</sup> As a result of Al-Baradan’s behaviour, about 1,700 ex-rebels were stripped of Russian patronage in the western region of Daraa and about 800 of them decided to enlist in the SAA, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, and in some cases, to sign yearly contracts with the MID.<sup>61</sup>

Once Russia’s protection was weakened, ex-rebels in the western region of Daraa on whose behalf Al-Baradan had negotiated were exposed to SAA arrests. Despite the Russian commitment to guarantee their protection and despite the fact that some had actually joined governmental forces, some former rebel leaders were attacked and killed.<sup>62</sup> More than 20 first- and second-rank rebel commanders who had ‘reconciled’ their status were arrested between June and October 2018 at government checkpoints. Arrests were linked directly to civilians filing what are called “personal rights lawsuits” against them.<sup>63</sup> To appease the population’s anger over arrests and to prevent any potential clashes, the RMP opened an office in the town of Da’el around October 2018. It was to receive complaints from ex-rebels and civilians, and to mitigate tensions between the SAA and Daraa inhabitants. As of December 2018, the office was receiving many complaints daily, submitted by ex-rebels and civilians who considered it effective and able to assist, especially in cases of harassment at checkpoints and particularly in cases where university students were being targeted for allegedly shirking military service.

Whether ‘reconciled’ or not, it seems that provoking civilians to sue ex-rebels was one way to get around the Russian vow to protect them. Initially, and after regaining territorial control over Daraa

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<sup>59</sup> Qutaiba Haj Ali, “Daraa: Russia Dissolves the 5th Corps... and the 4th Division Attracts its Fighters (in Arabic),” *Al-Modon*, September 17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2PRqLoy>.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with a former rebel, western region of Daraa governorate, November 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Qasioun, “Daraa Western Factions Had an Agreement with The Regime’s Intelligence” (in Arabic), *Qasioun*, October 11, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2CgJ0jA>.

<sup>62</sup> See for example the incident of Ayid Al-Obaid Al-Khalidi who joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Division of the SAA and had his home and family exposed to Air Force Intelligence attacks that led to his killing.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Modon, “Arresting Al-Froukh in Daraa: ‘Let Reconciliation Benefit You’” (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, October 24, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2AKTEyl>; SHAM Network, “Assad Forces Arrested One FSA Ex-Leaders In Daraa Suburbs” (in Arabic), *SHAM Network*, October 9, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2AKRmh9>; Zaman Al-Wasl, “Assad Starts Arresting The Reconciled Leaders in Daraa” (in Arabic), *Zaman Al-Wasl*, September 5, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2zGQIlq>; Syria TV, “The Regime Continues Arresting The Reconciliation Leaders in Daraa Despite the Fact That They Joined Its Forces (in Arabic),” *Syria TV*, October 14, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2P3OR2C>.

governorate, the GoS encouraged civilians to file lawsuits against ex-rebels for breaching their personal rights. From the GoS's point of view, this does not violate the Russian guarantee as reconciliation includes the dropping of prosecutions but not the relinquishing of personal rights complaints.<sup>64</sup> Remarkably, between July and August 2018, the number of lawsuits against ex-rebel leaders had reached 24. Some of these were related to abuses of civilians during the rebellion.<sup>65</sup> "Reconciliation does not benefit anyone who has a lawsuit against him,"<sup>66</sup> ex-rebel leader Ahmad Al-Faroukh stated in an interview on the Syrian TV channel after his arrest.<sup>67</sup>

That was the case in the western region of Daraa; thanks to Al-Oda's early surrender, ex-rebels who joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps in the eastern region seemed to have more bargaining power. To show its unique commitment, Russia intervened on one occasion to secure the release of an ex-QSS leader newly incorporated into the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps who had been arrested by the MID.<sup>68</sup> The condition to accommodate ex-rebels in the Russian-led 5<sup>th</sup> Corps was thus partially implemented, particularly when comparing Daraa's eastern and western regions.

Russia's abandonment of Al-Baradan had left room for the SAA and its security forces to sign private contracts and recruit many ex-rebels in the western region of Daraa. Today, many ex-rebels located in the western region of Daraa are in the ranks of the SAA's 4<sup>th</sup> Division, while others were lured into security agencies such as the MID. Iran also joined the effort to use ex-rebels and frustrated civilians as a recruitment pool. Abu Al-Fadl Al-Tabtabai, a representative of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, visited Daraa on October 24, 2018 and met with GoS officials. Al-Tabtabai reportedly offered aid for reconstruction and social services, aid that many see as bait to recruit locals into the ranks of Iranian-backed militias. As a response, protests took place in a number of localities in Daraa but mainly in Busra al-Sham to denounce the Iranian presence in the region and to reject Al-Tabtabai's visit to Daraa. Demonstrators called upon Russia to fulfil its commitment to prevent an Iranian-backed military presence.

All things considered, it must be kept in mind that going through 'reconciliation' and surrendering heavy armaments did not mean termination of the conflict. Some are reporting that due to the GoS' repeated violations of the agreement, unknown individuals have decided to pick up arms and shift from irregular to guerrilla warfare. The armed attacks launched on SAA and its reconciliation headquarters have left many fatalities and injured soldiers. The start of these assaults dates to October 2018 with an attack on military checkpoints that resulted in fatalities in the city of Jasim by a group calling itself the "Popular Resistance".<sup>69</sup> The Popular Resistance appears to be an actor of potential disorder. The movement officially announced its emergence in mid-November 2018<sup>70</sup> and continued to carry out

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<sup>64</sup> Personal rights lawsuits may refer to instances of killing, kidnapping, looting, causing destruction, etc.

<sup>65</sup> Hauran Free Gathering (Tajamou' Ahrar Hawran), "Assad's Regime retaliates from Southern Syria's Factions by Provoking civilians (in Arabic) *Hauran Free Gathering (Tajamou' Ahrar Hawran)* (blog), August 19, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Ed8BvU>.

<sup>66</sup> "Arresting Al-Froukh in Daraa: 'Let Reconciliation Benefit You'", *op. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Ahmad Al-Faroukh is an ex-leader in Syria's Revolutionaries Front. He was arrested by the Air Force Intelligence in al-Harra city on September 15, 2018 along with three other leaders and they were transferred to the Criminal Security apparatus in the city of al-Sanamayn as a result of the lawsuits filed against them.

<sup>68</sup> Qutaiba Haj Ali, "Daraa: Wholesale Arrests Against Reconciled Leaders" (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, September 13, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2xoNVMn>.

<sup>69</sup> El-Dorar Al-Shamiya, "The First Attack of 'Popular Resistance' Against the Regime in Daraa... Targeted A Military Checkpoint" (in Arabic), *El-Dorar Al-Shamiya*, October 16, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2E3UVTb>.

<sup>70</sup> Neda Syria, "A Remarkable Development. The Announcement of The Emergence of 'Popular Resistance' Against the Regime in Southern Syria" (in Arabic), *Neda Syria*, November 17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Ed0K1f>.

attacks including one against the Criminal Security Branch (فرع الأمن الجنائي) in Daraa and checkpoints in the city of al-Sanamayn.<sup>71</sup>

The armed group is likely to be led and organized by an actor who exited the negotiation talks with minimal or no gains. Negotiations, especially those in conflicts between multiple warring parties, often produce losers. In the context of peace processes, leaders who believe that the emerging order threatens their powers may decide to employ violence to change the trajectory of the proceedings, and therefore undermine efforts to end the conflict.<sup>72</sup> If the “Popular Resistance” succeeds, peace in Daraa could collapse. The level of their effectiveness in undermining Daraa’s fragile peace will be dependent on the level of popular support they can obtain from below, or whether they can be adopted by an external patron from above, perhaps one that would not want to witness the presence of Iranian-backed militias in southern Syria.

### ***Civilian Actors: Displacement, Reconciliation and Arrest***

In late June 2018, during some of the negotiating sessions that included personnel from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Health Organization and the Syrian Red Crescent, rebel leaders as well as civilian activists engaged in discussions with the Russian delegation about the humanitarian situation in Daraa and the future provision of state services. By July 5, 2018, the military campaign of June 2018 had resulted in more than 320,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs).<sup>73 74</sup> In that regard, Russia partially respected its commitment to enable the return of IDPs to their localities in Daraa and Quneitra governorates, escorted by the RMP. This commitment was fulfilled between July 18 and August 1, 2018.

External to this agreement are the IDPs of about 40 villages in al-Lajat area.<sup>75</sup> IDPs from that region were estimated to number around 74,000 civilians who escaped the indiscriminate violence of the June campaign. As of December 2018, about 4,000 had been relocated to Izra’, a small number had been returned to their localities, and the remaining IDPs lived within the eastern region of Daraa. The villages of the area have been completely destroyed by Iranian-backed militias. As of this writing, the area is under the control of Hezbollah.<sup>76</sup> It is noteworthy that villages in al-Lajat were exposed to raids by the SAA and state security agencies in the beginning of August 2018. Many civilians were detained and transferred to the town of Ibta’ on suspicion of having affiliation with IS. The SAA and state security agencies ploughed the villages and destroyed homes to prevent IDPs from returning.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Nedaa Syria, “A Remarkable Development ... ‘Popular Resistance’ Attacks the Branch of ‘Criminal Security’ in Daraa”, (in Arabic), *Nedaa Syria*, November 25, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2PhWy1f>.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen John Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” in *International Conflict Resolution after The Cold War*, ed. Daniel Druckman and Paul C. Stern (National Academy Press, 2000), 178-224.

<sup>73</sup> ReliefWeb, “South-West Syria: Forced Displacement, Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC),” *ReliefWeb*, July 5, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2CfLZZB>

<sup>74</sup> Of 320,000 IDPs, about 12,000 to 15,000 had crossed into government-held areas in Daraa governorate, 2,000 had crossed into Sweida governorate, about 60,000 remained stuck in the vicinity of the Nasib border crossing with Jordan, and a significant number had moved towards Quneitra governorate.

<sup>75</sup> This number excludes the archaeological sites. Note that a village in al-Lajat area is, sometimes, composed of just 20 homes.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with a humanitarian activist, Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Modon, “Daraa: Plowing and Evacuations in Villages in Al-Lajat,” (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, accessed December 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ED8fxP>.

## **RMP Escorting IDPs to their Localities in Daraa Governorate**



*Source: A Local Activist*

Apart from the IDPs, the issue of the release of detainees remains unresolved; neither the GoS nor Russian guarantors are addressing it. During the talks, state representatives promised to release prisoners who had been captured up to three months prior to the start of the military campaign, that is, before March 2018. When the opposition attempted to extend the period, the Russian delegation intervened and rejected the release of anyone captured before the three-month period, claiming the issue of prisoners and detainees to be one that belonged to the Astana negotiations. Civilians who have approached the RMP patrolling Daraa localities to ask about releasing detainees have been promised by Russian officers that they will discuss the issue with the GoS.<sup>78</sup>

Remarkably, the arrests did not stop. However, more have been arrested in the western than the eastern region of Daraa. Such arrests were often carried out at different checkpoints stationed on roads and highways between localities in the western region of Daraa and staffed by the Syrian Criminal Security branch, MID, and Air Force Intelligence. Many civilians were arrested despite their ‘reconciled status.’ For instance, the number of documented arrests in the month of September 2018 was 40 individuals, including 9 former rebel leaders and 16 former rebel combatants. The number increased in October 2018 to 72, including 8 former rebel leaders and 33 former rebel fighters.<sup>79</sup> Between December 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, more than 75 civilians and ex-rebels were arrested in the western region of Daraa for failing to perform obligatory reserve military service.<sup>80</sup> Both civilians and ex-rebels in the eastern region of Daraa, however seem to enjoy a relatively higher level of Russian protection from arrests. “I can recall many instances where civilians were detained at checkpoints on their way to Daraa city. QSS heard of that and immediately reported it to the Russian RMP who helped release them on spot.”<sup>81</sup>

Russia argues that its commitment does not include mediating for arrestees accused of criminal acts and that releasing them is the prerogative of the government, the only actor with state sovereignty and judicial bodies. This contravenes the Russian promise to settle the status of army defectors and draft evaders, however. While cases of military evaders or defectors being arrested by the SAA or security branches have been reported, interviews suggest that more than 3,500 individuals—mainly in the

<sup>78</sup> Interview with a male participant who attended the meeting, Daraa governorate, November 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with a local activist, western region of Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Enab Baladi, “Human Rights Report: Assad Forces Arrested 70 Individuals in Daraa Within Two Days”, (in Arabic)” *Enab Baladi*, December 3, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Ed8iBg>.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with a male participant, eastern region of Daraa governorate, November 2018.

western region of Daraa—joined the army between September and October 2018 in order to ensure their security by performing military service. They may have also joined in an attempt to benefit from the Presidential Decree No.18 of 2018 that grants general amnesty for internal and external desertions.<sup>82</sup> While some civilians decided to join the SAA, others decided to shift and demonstrate renewed civil resistance. On December 21, 2018, civilians took to the streets in Daraa city demanding the “toppling of the regime, chant[ing] against local reconciliations and agreements, demand[ing] the release of detainees, and accus[ing] those who joined 4<sup>th</sup> Division and SAA of being traitors.”<sup>83</sup>

### 3. Rearranging the Political Order: Territories, Borders, and Institutions

In civil wars, the distribution of territorial control can be either fragmented or segmented.<sup>84</sup> When rebels surrender, and the contestation of territories ends, one may expect the state to regain full and absolute territorial control, including that over border crossings and boundaries. Evidence from Daraa suggests, however, that in post-capitulation settings, state control over territories varies across time and space.

During civil war, rebels often establish governments for the populations living in areas under their control,<sup>85</sup> and state services are often replaced by governance systems established by rebels. Evidence from Daraa suggests that some state institutions have continued to operate in rebel-controlled areas, and that the Syrian government may have carried out a minimum of its responsibilities towards populations living in rebel-held areas without necessarily identifying them as “defectors.”<sup>86</sup> These state services extended to providing electricity, water, and monthly salaries to state employees, effectively undermining rebel efforts to generate the civilian support they needed at the onset of negotiations. I argue that the sporadic state infiltration of rebel governance during the rebellion in Daraa<sup>87</sup>, and promises of a return of state services during negotiations, provoked civilians to push rebels to surrender their weapons.

#### *State, Territories and Borders: Revisiting ‘Territorial Control’ in Daraa*

Based on the Russian-sponsored agreement, civil government institutions reopened and resumed operations across Daraa governorate. It had been agreed, however, to limit the presence of SAA and state security agencies to checkpoints at the outskirts and entrances of localities. Through mobile and fixed checkpoints on the roads and highways, Syrian security services are likely to have control over most of the roads between Daraa hamlets.

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<sup>82</sup> Syrian Prime Ministry, “Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2018 Granting A General Amnesty for The Full Sentence of The Crimes of Internal and External Desertion Committed Before 9-10-2018”, (in Arabic), *Syrian Prime Ministry*, October 9, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2E1fdwh>.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with a male participant, Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>84</sup> For a thorough discussion over territorial distribution during civil wars, see: Paul Staniland, “States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (June 2012): 243–64; Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*.

<sup>85</sup> Nelson Kasfir, “Rebel Governance - Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes,” in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, ed. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21.

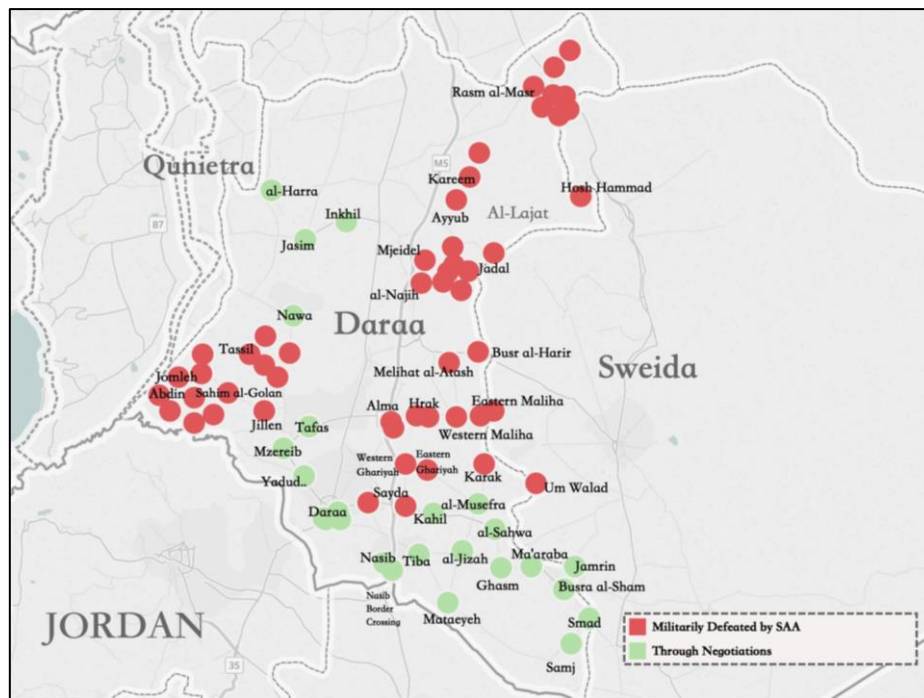
<sup>86</sup> “Defectors” here refers to a type of civilian behaviour during wartime that entails “aiding the enemy, either by offering its spontaneous support or enlisting as a full-time member.” Ana Arjona, “Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups: The Centrality of Obedience and Resistance,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28, no. 4–5 (September 3, 2017): 763. For a thorough discussion of civilian behaviours during wartime, see: Shane Joshua Barter, *Civilian Strategy in Civil War: Insights From Indonesia, Thailand, and The Philippines* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Arjona, “Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups: The Centrality of Obedience and Resistance”; Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*.

<sup>87</sup> With the exception of the JKBW-held areas.

As the state regained territorial control upon defeat of the rebels, the term “territorial control” in Daraa lost a clear meaning. In fact, the concept of a territory “under state control” needs to be revisited and further unpacked in order to explore the variation in territorial configurations. In that regard, I distinguish between two types of post-surrender territory (see Figure 4.). The first refers to areas that were not directly involved in concrete negotiations, and were brought back under government control through military force that either defeated rebel groups or forced them to retreat. The GoS reopened civil state institutions in these localities while the SAA retreated and stationed its forces at checkpoints at their entrances. Yet, the SAA is able to enter and patrol these areas without any restriction on their movement. The villages and towns of the al-Lajat area are an example.

The second refers to localities where rebel organizations reconciled under the aegis of Russia without the presence, or with just a light presence, of SAA forces, such as Busra al-Sham, al-Sahwa, Ma’araba, al-Jizah. I argue that the way in which rebel rule came to an end in each area, that is through military force or negotiation, shaped the subsequent quality of state governance and service provision in that territory.

**Figure 4. The Strategy Adopted in Ending Rebel Rule in Daraa Governorate<sup>88</sup>**



*Source: Author*

Under the second territorial arrangement, the role of the RMP has been to prevent clashes between armed parties. During negotiations, it was agreed to establish RMP observatory points. However, Russia preferred to operate roaming patrols and to deploy forces whenever clashes between parties appeared imminent. The RMP sends six roving patrols daily across the eastern and western regions of Daraa. These patrols stop to listen to civilian complaints and to make sure that the agreement sponsored by Russia is not violated. “We often see them roving. They stop to talk to people. We told them about our struggle with service provision, and they listened to us without complaining, but all we heard is promises,” one man from the eastern region of Daraa explained.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with a male participant, eastern region of Daraa governorate, October 2018.

Reassuming territorial control can entail controlling border crossings that have a significant impact on the state's economy. On April 1, 2015 the GoS lost control of Nasib, Syria's southern gate, which rebel organizations then declared full control over.<sup>90</sup> Restoring Nasib on July 6, 2018<sup>91</sup> remains a substantial achievement and a big economic relief to the GoS. It helped the regime to break its 'commercial isolation' and regain its export gateway for local goods destined for Arab countries. The crossing connects a number of countries in the region together in a route that has generated billions of dollars in trade.<sup>92</sup> Nasib also had associated with it a free trade-zone<sup>93</sup> that provided jobs for about 4,000 individuals from both Jordan and Syria (particularly individuals from Daraa), 35 factories, more than 100 car exhibitions, storage facilities and tens of shops. Moreover, Nasib played a key role in improving the economic situation of Daraa peasants as tons of vegetables were exported from Daraa to Jordan on a daily basis.<sup>94</sup>

Anticipating the positive economic impact of the Nasib border crossing reopening, the Syrian Ministry of Transportation increased transit fees<sup>95</sup> in September 2018.<sup>96</sup> Later, and after a series of negotiations with the Jordanian government, the Syrian Minister of Interior, Major General Mohammed Ibrahim Al-Sha'ar, announced that the re-opening of Nasib-Jabir border crossing with Jordan would take place on October 15, 2018.<sup>97</sup> As of November 21, 2018, the government claimed the return of 2,380 individuals to Syria through Nasib<sup>98</sup>, allegedly encouraged by Presidential Decree No.18 of 2018 that grants general amnesty for internal and external deserters.

Since its reactivation, Nasib has operated under the control of Air Force Intelligence between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., and it reopens between 8 and 10 p.m. solely for trucks and transit vehicles. Evidence suggest that the movement of goods has flourished. Due to high prices in Jordan, Jordanian trailers enter Syria to buy vegetables from Daraa and to purchase foodstuffs such as sugar, rice, and tea from Damascus. Yet, the reopening did not please Jordanian peasants. Some were reportedly seen spoiling their citrus fruits in Aghwar Shamaliyah district as a form of protest. Peasants appealed to the Jordanian Ministry of Agricultural to stop filling the internal market with Syrian products as it was causing them losses due to the competitively cheap prices of Syrian crops.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, and as described by many interviewees, the re-opening of Nasib led to a price increase for goods in Daraa as the massive Jordanian demand for cheaper Syrian products encouraged peasants to increase their prices at local markets. This price increase was not limited to agricultural products. "Jordanians are sharing our food and fuel," a civilian from Daraa complained. "They enter Daraa, go to gas stations to fill tens of gallons, buy vegetables and food

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<sup>90</sup> Reuters, "Syrian Rebels Seize Jordan Crossing from Government: Rebel, Security Source," *Reuters*, April 1, 2015, <https://reut.rs/2rl8p57>.

<sup>91</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Laila Bassam, "South Syrian Rebels Agree Surrender Deal, Assad Takes Crossing," *Reuters*, July 6, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2UeX7wM>.

<sup>92</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Lisa Barrington, "Jordan and Syria Reopen Nasib Border Crossing," *Reuters*, October 15, 2018, <https://reut.rs/2Sv3HgD>.

<sup>93</sup> The free-trade zone is under construction at the time of writing.

<sup>94</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, "Public and Commercial anticipation of The Results of The Opening of The Border Crossing of Nasib-Jaber", (in Arabic), *Asharq Al-Awsat*, October 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2UhZLBA>.

<sup>95</sup> The new decision increases the fees based on the equation: Car Weight X Distance X 10% = Value in USD. The rate applied was 2% in the past. This fee is applied only for land transit; the original 2% remains for sea ports.

<sup>96</sup> Rola Attar, "Syria Increases Trucks Land Transit Fees", (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, September 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Ee0e30>.

<sup>97</sup> SANA, "Re-opening Nasib-Jaber Border Crossing Tomorrow", (in Arabic), *Syrian Government Official News Agency*, SANA (blog), October 14, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Pj95BQ>.

<sup>98</sup> SANA, "The Return of Over 2000 Displaced People Due to Terrorism Through Nasib Border Crossing, and Reconciling the Status of 300 Persons", (in Arabic), *Syrian Government Official News Agency*, SANA (blog), accessed December 4, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2zQFta7>.

<sup>99</sup> Aliqtisadi, "Because of The Syrian Products ... Jordanian Peasants Spoil Their Citrus Fruits", (in Arabic), *Aliqtisadi*, December 6, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2RHjjOi>.



rations, and return to their homes in Jordan by the end of the day. Indeed, Jordan was besieged when Nasib was closed and not us.”<sup>100</sup>

### ***The Re-emergence of State Institutions and Service Provision***

During civil wars, state institutions may remain in some areas and vanish in others leaving a governance vacuum. As a result, a segment of civilians may decide to flee areas that have fallen under rebel control while others will prefer to stay in their communities.<sup>101</sup> To distinguish themselves from “roving bandits”<sup>102</sup>, rebel groups often decide to become a continuous presence and an alternative provider of governance. During times of war, civilians have essential needs that rebels must take into account, including security, food, and medical care. Hence, institutions that govern civilians begin to emerge and shape civilian-rebel interactions.<sup>103</sup>

Evidence from Daraa suggests that the Syrian state institutions had inconspicuously operated under rebel rule and contributed to the erosion of rebel governance. In many instances, state institutions provided electricity and water to rebel-held areas and even regulated the payment of public sector employees’ salaries. I suggest the term of “state penetration of rebel governance”<sup>104</sup> to denote cases where the state provides the minimum of services to a certain population living in a strongly rebel-controlled area. This section sheds light on that phenomenon, as well as the agreement between rebel leaders, the civilian opposition bodies, and the Russian guarantee of service provision. I argue that Russia and the Syrian state delegates have used the return of services as a tactic to prevent rebels from winning the population’s “hearts and minds” and to provoke civilians to push rebel leaders to the negotiating table.

### ***The Return of Local State Institutions***

During the negotiations of June/July 2018, few talks revolved around the possibility of preserving the existence of opposition-run local councils (LCs). It was claimed that representatives from these institutions had offered to merge with the state’s municipalities. The Russian delegation expressed acceptance and committed to fostering the amalgamation in a joint LC. However, and so far, the current situation shows otherwise. The opposition’s LCs have been marginalized. They do exist as built infrastructure in some localities, and members of formerly governing LCs still go to their offices. But they are inactive and their contribution to any type of service provision is non-existent.

The GoS took advantage of the weak LCs and a vacuum of institutions to act on President Assad’s Presidential Decree No.214 of June 24, 2018, and hold its own municipal elections.<sup>105</sup> According to the decree, these were scheduled to take place on September 16, 2018. As advertised by the Ministry of Local Administration, polls opened with more than 40,000 candidates standing for 18,478 council seats.<sup>106</sup> In Daraa, 2120 candidates ran in local elections for 1096 seats including 450 seats on the Daraa

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with a male participant, Daraa governorate, November 2018.

<sup>101</sup> Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4.

<sup>102</sup> Mancur Olson, “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development,” *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 567–76.

<sup>103</sup> Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 163.

<sup>104</sup> The term of “history of state penetration”, or the pre-war degree of state penetration into society, was originally used by Zachariah Mampilly to denote a dimension that shapes rebel governance. See: Zachariah Chierian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>105</sup> SANA, “Decree on Election of Local Councils’ Members, Law Amending Provisions of Penal Code of Marriage Contracts Outside Courts,” Syrian Government Official News Agency, SANA (blog), June 24, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2UcC0Lf>.

<sup>106</sup> Middle East Eye, “Kurds Refuse to Take Part in Polls in First Local Elections in Syria Since 2011,” *Middle East Eye* (blog), September 16, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2U5ORPz>.

Provincial Council. The number of election centres reached 175 (26 were located in Daraa city, others were distributed in localities such as Izra' and al-Sanamayn in the northern region; Nawa in the western region; and al-Jizah, Um Walad, and Eastern Ghariyah in the eastern region). The number of ballot boxes in the end was 320.<sup>107</sup>

On October 2, 2018, President Assad issued two decrees, No.304 and No.305, proclaiming the winners.<sup>108</sup> Local administrative elections are, in general, considered to be key venues for expression of citizen views and preferences. In Syria, they are a crucial means by which the regime can enhance its legitimacy, produce stability, and regulate and dominate reconstruction planning. Reconstruction is an enormous and lucrative operation, one of particular significance in light of decision No.51 issued on December 31, 2018, by which the Syrian Prime Ministry empowered the Minister of Local Administration to head the Syrian "reconstruction committee" and to supervise the reconstruction of the damaged infrastructure and public facilities.<sup>109</sup>

Overall, despite the government's claims of smoothly-run elections, the prevalent belief is that the Baath party dismissed the election results and allocated council seats to its members and Assad loyalists. "It seems that civilians are the only losers of this war. . . fighters joined the Russians, Assad security forces are back, and the Baathists are in every local council now," said one civilian in Daraa.<sup>110</sup> In response, civilians carried out protests in several localities such as Busra al-Sham, Mzereib and Tafas. Protestors demanded new elections and rejected their representatives: figures allegedly affiliated with Hezbollah. "They [winners of local elections] are not originally from our towns; they are Assad supporters and have connections with Hezbollah and Iran. We either demand and enforce their removal now or they will suppress us again later on," said one interviewee.<sup>111</sup>

At this point it seems fair to say that the Russian vow to merge opposition LCs with the state's municipalities is a nonstarter. Russian patrols receive complaints from civilian and opposition officials about the side-lining of their LCs. Officials have met with those from the GoS, and have repeatedly promised the opposition a fair solution. But the issue of LCs seems not to be a priority for Russia at the moment. The fact is that the GoS has made its decisions regarding local institutions and is brooking no compromise; change will depend on Russian intervention, i.e., a genuine effort to honour its commitment. While achieving proportional representation in local administration is a step ahead and an advantage for the opposition, as discussed, Syrian authorities view local administration as a key element in plans for reconstruction. The gradual revival of Baathist rule signals a difficult road ahead for dissenters in their struggle for effective local institutional representation or even for minimal participation in the future of local governance.

### *Service Provision: The State Negotiating Tool, Civilians' Basic Needs*

The resentment of civilians over ineffective rebel governance, and their need for effective, thus restored public, services, was used by the Russian delegation to incite them to push rebels to surrender. Throughout the Syrian conflict, rebel-held areas had suffered from a lack of technicians, doctors, engineers, and funding, making it impossible for LCs to meet all civilians' basic needs. For the whole of the seven year war, Daraa remained dependent on the state for provision of electricity and water. In

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<sup>107</sup> Al-Baath Media, "Elections of Local Administration .. Heavy Turnout of Voters to Election Centres in Daraa" (in Arabic), *Al-Baath Media* (blog), September 16, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2RZCEKJ>.

<sup>108</sup> SANA, "President Al-Assad Issues Decrees No.304, 305 Stipulating Names of Members of Municipalities," Syrian Government Official News Agency, *SANA* (blog), October 2, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DZNxYE>.

<sup>109</sup> Ministry of Local Administration, "Reconstruction Committee," (in Arabic), *Ministry of Local Administration* (blog), December 31, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2Q9IXON>.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with a male participant, western region of Daraa governorate, November 2018

<sup>111</sup> Interview with a male participant, western region of Daraa governorate, November 2018.

many cases, the restoration of electricity and water systems was conducted by state institutions, sometimes using actors such as the Red Crescent as brokers.<sup>112</sup>

Service provision did not, however, eliminate the assaults. Rather than simply using indiscriminate violence to defeat the rebels by ‘draining the sea’<sup>113</sup> (eliminating the environment of the fish), the GoS adopted a more complex strategy. This combined indiscriminate violence with allowance of continued penetration of rebel governance into state institutions in order to reach and influence behaviour of the civilians that rebel organizations relied upon for their survival. Rebel governance in Daraa was merely a façade for a system within which state institutions linked to Damascus played a key role. The only civil institution that persisted during the conflict and satisfied civilian needs was the pre-war tribal institution of dispute adjudication. Despite being under rebel rule, the GoS preserved its ties to the local Daraa population by tethering them to existing state institutions; this to the extent of issuing a decision to pay the salaries of state employees living in rebel-held areas. The GoS even produced a set of rules to regulate these payments.<sup>114</sup>

From the civilians’ perspective, these factors generated a need for emancipation from the rebel-led institutions and created a form of pressure from below that pushed the rebels to demand GoS-delivered services as a pre-condition of surrender. “We remained patient just for the sake of a change in the country. . . But at some point, they [rebels] could not bring one electrical convertor while our electricity was coming from their enemies [regime]. . . I hate the regime, but let’s face it, they [rebels] lacked the minimum of diplomacy and ability to negotiate. They stopped fighting and did not gain one extra metre for more than three years. Then why should we [civilians] defend them in the face of the regime?. . . Rulers provide services, and if the regime is still able to provide these then I have no choice but to accept it back,” one civilian explained regarding the revival of state institutions in Daraa governorate. “They [rebels] were not Che Guevara(s) anyway,” he concluded.<sup>115</sup> In the eyes of their populace, rebel organizations had failed to develop an effective system of governance and had allowed state-penetrated governance systems to emergence.

Governance normally entails service provision. Service provision had been one of the primary issues discussed during talks with the Russian delegation, and the destruction of some localities in the June 2018 military campaign made service provision critical. Russia had promised to facilitate the return of functional state institutions to Daraa, and they had guaranteed the return of all dismissed employees to their state posts. Now, the state’s civil institutions are back in operation throughout most Daraa localities. This includes municipalities, civil registries, hospitals, and civil police, including some members of the opposition’s Free Syrian Police (FSP) who had joined the state’s police service.<sup>116</sup> However, the GoS’ efforts to restore infrastructure, to date, have been slow and ineffective, especially in areas where rebels withdrew and ended their rule under the SAA’s fierce assault.

Infrastructure in localities where rebel rule ended militarily, such as Nahta, Busr al-Harir, Melihat al-Atash, Eastern Maliha, and Western Mailha, vanished in the June military campaign, and basic services there now are almost non-existent. The opposition demanded that the GoS deliver basic services to these areas, but it seems that the GoS is unable to provide infrastructure reconstruction for devastated

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<sup>112</sup> Enab Baladi, “The Regime’s Institutions Operate in Daraa ‘Liberated areas,’” (in Arabic), December 17, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2UOBMDJ>.

<sup>113</sup> Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, “‘Draining the Sea’: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare,” *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 375–407.

<sup>114</sup> Enab Baladi, “The Syrian Regime Obliges Its Employees in the Opposition-held Areas to Come in Person to Collect Their Salaries,” (in Arabic), March 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2UNSVJH>.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with a male participant, northwest region of Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>116</sup> The FSP Service’s contract was terminated around May 2018, a month before the beginning of the military campaign. In that regard, a letter was sent from the donors to the FSP’s police headquarters that notified them of their decision to stop funding. Interviews with civilians suggest that several members of FSP have joined the government civil police services in Daraa province.

areas. Engineers who were dispatched by the GoS to Busr al-Harir to check the electrical grid were apparently unable to get it back online. One civilian in northwest Daraa reported that the head of this engineering team told civilians in September that “the government is unable to provide any electricity for the whole area at the moment. And this is not limited to this town. We are sorry.”<sup>117</sup>

In the context of the limited capacity of formal governance actors to provide services, NGOs have played a key role in rebel governance, helping to form what some have termed “multi-layered governance.”<sup>118</sup> NGOs supported local councils in providing such services as medical care, digging wells, providing food baskets, and trash collection. In a post-surrender era, some NGOs have exited the scene while others have offered their services, presenting themselves as potentially effective local actors for reconstruction planning. NGOs, especially those who want to provide aid and offer public services, are required to obtain governmental permission to operate in Daraa governorate. Some applied for this permission following rebel surrender, but by the end of 2018, the GoS had yet to respond.

### *Civilian Needs and the Return of Dismissed Employees*

After the cessation of hostilities, and despite the slow return of services, civilians are generally returning to normal life. Bakeries are operating again, baking around 3.5-5 tons of wheat per day; markets with vegetables and fruits are flourishing despite the high prices as a result of the Nasib crossing’s reopening. Yet hardly a day goes by without civilians struggling to meet one need or another. “It’s a chaotic situation, but it’s normal after this war. . . aside from politics, life is getting back slowly. There is enough bread and food for people in my city, which I actually care about the most at the moment,” said one civilian in eastern Daraa.<sup>119</sup>

Healthcare presents another challenge in the post-surrender era, just as it did during the conflict. In April 2014, it was estimated that 80 percent of Daraa’s doctors, around 3,500, had fled to neighbouring countries.<sup>120 121</sup> As of December 2018, Daraa’s health workers were desperate to enhance its healthcare provisions: to rebuild its infrastructure and restock its medicine supplies. Medical care provided by the government is limited to Red Cross convoys and mobile clinics sent from Daraa Health Directorate to service areas inhabited by thousands of civilians.<sup>122</sup>

In the eastern region of Daraa, the surrender of rebels has allowed civilians to avoid further destruction of infrastructure. The hospital in Busra al-Sham is one of the last standing medical institutions. It serves about 250,000 civilians and needs staff and medications.<sup>123</sup> On many occasions, civilians desperately appealed to the Russian officer responsible for services and civilian affairs in both eastern and western regions of Daraa, as well as to the GoS, for help in covering the needs of the hospital. “Our work is limited to injections and simple treatments. We stopped doing any operations as we do not

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<sup>117</sup> Interview with a male participant, northwest region of Daraa governorate, October 2018).

<sup>118</sup> The term denotes cases where more local actors, hostile, friendly, or both, appear and influence rebel behaviour. For a thorough discussion of the term, See: Nelson Kasfir, Georg Frerks, and Niels Terpstra, “Introduction: Armed Groups and Multi-Layered Governance,” *Civil Wars* 19, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 257–78.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with a male participant, eastern region of Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Mahran Al-Diri, “Daraa’s Escapee Doctors: Victims or Guilty?” (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera*, April 29, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2KRPU1a>.

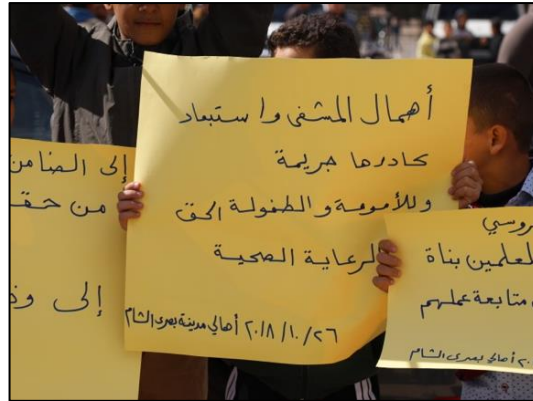
<sup>121</sup> It is worth noting that the lack of a medical cadre is not new to Daraa. Until March 2018, there was just one anaesthesiologist operating in rebel-held areas in both provinces of Daraa and Quneitra. The anaesthesiologist Bilal Al-Hariri died of injuries sustained in a car accident in March 2018. See details: Enab Baladi, “The Death of the Only Anaesthesiologist in Liberated Daraa,” (in Arabic), March 16, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2EcGQU8>.

<sup>122</sup> Al-Modon, “Daraa: Deterioration of the Medical Sector after Closing the Field Hospitals,” (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, August 26, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2AMTB3G>.

<sup>123</sup> As explained to the author by local doctors, Doctors Without Borders stopped its support to Busra al-Sham Hospital in July 2018, a month after the beginning of the military campaign in Daraa.

have the capacity, equipment or needed medications,” said one doctor from the eastern region of Daraa.<sup>124</sup>

### **Civilians in Busra al-Sham Appealing to Russia as Negotiation Guarantor to Improve Medical Care. October 26, 2018**



*Source: A Local Activist*

In the western suburbs of Daraa, while the Izra’ and al-Sanamyan hospitals were still operating, the Tafas hospital was converted into a family dispensary that does not cater to civilian medical needs. In Daraa city, the National Hospital is functioning and provides relatively good medical care. “Comparing it to other hospitals, it is the place where you can get healthcare, meet doctors, and obtain medication,” said one civilian who approached a number of hospitals in Daraa governorate and was satisfied with the National Hospital.<sup>125</sup>

As for education, primary and secondary schools in Daraa are open and operate under the administration of the Syrian Ministry of Education’s Education Directorate. However, many schools lack teachers and principals. The opposition asked Russian representatives to put pressure on the GoS to allow about 160 teachers dismissed during the conflict to return to their jobs. Russian representatives had promised during surrender negotiations that they would take up this issue and have reportedly met with officials from the Education Directorate in Daraa to discuss dismissed teachers.<sup>126</sup>

In general, the return of civil employees to their jobs remains a complicated issue. The Syrian state issued judicial decisions dismissing civil employees in absentia, most of whom were teachers, who were not performing their jobs prior to the military campaign. Some of these continued to receive a salary, however, and as a result, as reported in October, 2018, were asked to attend a court hearing or pay a fine.<sup>127</sup> In addition, though there may be some overlap, thousands of state employees were dismissed who had not been on the job during the conflict years or who had lawsuits filed against them.<sup>128</sup> The Russian delegation has not been successful in helping dismissed employees to return to their posts. This is partly because Syrian officials are justifying judicial procedures against many of them in terms of upholding the domestic rule of law, but also because this matter does not seem to be a priority for Russia right now. In light of this state of ineffective governance, civilians took to the streets in some of Daraa

<sup>124</sup> Interview with a medical doctor, western region of Daraa governorate, October 2018.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with a male participant, eastern region of Daraa governorate, November 2018.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with a local activist, Daraa governorate, December 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Horrya Press, “Assad’s Regime Punishes South Syria’s Teachers with Imprisonment and Fines.” (in Arabic), *Horrya Press*, October 20, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2QBu6w2>.

<sup>128</sup> Arabi21, “Assad’s Regime Dismisses Thousands of South Syria’s Employees,” (in Arabic), *Arabi21*, September 27, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Qf3fqr>.

localities, primarily in Busra al-Sham, to protest the lack of services and to call upon Russia to fulfil its commitment as guarantor of the conditions of surrender by improving the living conditions of locals.

## **Conclusion**

This research has presented a wide range of developments that have taken place in Daraa governorate after a Russian-brokered agreement that ended rebel rule. The study has investigated the variation in Russia's fulfilment of its commitment in the two principle regions of Daraa governorate, and found it to be a function of the behaviour of rebel actors at the negotiating table. This behaviour strengthened or weakened Russia's level of commitment, in the post-surrender era, to each former rebel group and to the civilians in their localities.

The international donor community now faces a choice in southern Syria between inaction, hence acceptance of re-emergence of state rule, and further engagement with Russia, the key actor on the ground, to influence the trajectory of post-rebel rule. But is Russia a reliable partner? With regard to the commitments made in surrender negotiations, Russia has so far made good on its obligation as guarantor in only one commitment, the return of IDPs to their localities.

A partial accomplishment has been settling of the status of local individuals and accommodation of former rebels. This is 'partial' because it was achieved through leveraging of the eastern region over the western region of Daraa, a process based on Russia's perception of the relative performance of rebel leaders representing these regions during negotiations. In the western region, undertaking the "reconciliation procedure" is a mere formality which accords no guarantee of safety to the individual and most former rebels are, as of this writing, in the ranks of the SAA or the state's security agencies. In contrast, former rebels in the eastern region of Daraa are integrated into the Russian-supervised 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, civilians detained at government-run checkpoints are normally released quickly after intervention through Russian mediation, and Russia is showing a high level of commitment to deterring the government from retaliating against them.

Based on this experience, Russia is considered a reliable actor by former rebels from Daraa's eastern region who joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps. Being accommodated within what is a de facto Russian armed faction is the best deal: it gives the fighters the power to enforce their protection vis-à-vis the Syrian armed forces. Conversely, Russia is not a reliable guarantor for the majority of ordinary civilians and officials of civilian bodies in the western region of Daraa governorate who, as a result of Al-Baradan's behaviour, were abandoned and lost Russian patronage. The only choice left to them has been to join regular SAA divisions or state security agencies.

Finally, Russia is not a reliable guarantor with respect to releasing detainees, nor is it in matters of local governance and institutions. Russia seems to be turning a blind eye to the rest of its commitments either because it considers these to be the Syrian state's internal affairs or because it does not prioritize matters beyond the purely military and security-related. Russia sees its primary goal as preventing any renewed outbreak of armed clashes between the SAA and former rebels.

The efforts Russia put into ending the conflict between the warring parties has transformed southern Syria and marks the beginning of a new era. Under the nascent configuration, the international donor community - unlike the US that seems uninterested in any involvement - may want to pay close attention to the fluctuating post-surrender political, military, and economic conditions of Syria's south.

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