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Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries

Abdullah Al-Jabassini

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**

Research Project Report
4 November 2019
2019/15

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Middle East Directions
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Research Project Report
RSCAS/Middle East Directions 2019/15
4 November 2019

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Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
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With the support of the
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Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries

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Executive summary

In July 2018, the Government of Syria regained control over Daraa governorate through Russian-brokered negotiations that led rebels to their capitulation. Since then, violence has been flaring up and the state is facing challenges in resuming service provision. While this is generally true, at the local level there is variation, with secured areas that enjoy better service delivery and other regions where security is decreasing and civilians are struggling to meet their daily needs.

Examining interactions at the local level, this study finds the following variations. First, the eastern region of Daraa enjoys better service delivery and security because of the availability and effectiveness of the 8th Brigade of the Russian-backed 5th Corps. In this region, civilians are able to tap into the 8th Brigade command, which opens channels with local institutions or central authorities to represent civilian demands and make sure they are heard.

Second, the western region of Daraa suffers from bad service delivery and security is decreasing. Although the Syrian Arab Army and a wide range of security apparatuses are present, the region witnesses unclaimed guerrilla attacks, IED explosions, assassinations and kidnappings of former rebels, government officials, Syrian army soldiers and security apparatus members. As civilians do not have an intermediary available, they rely on collective action to seek temporary governance-related solutions. In addition, civilian resentment erupts in protests and, in some cases, confrontations with state-affiliated armed forces.

Third, in Daraa city a Central Negotiations Committee acts as an intermediary for civilians, channelling civilian concerns to local institutions or central state authorities. However, its endeavours are largely ignored by the latter and so are perceived as ineffective by the local population. In these cases, civilians launch initiatives to find temporary solutions to poor service provision and also display their resentment of state policies in protests.

Introduction

In mid-June 2018, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) supported by Russian airpower launched a military campaign to regain control over Daraa governorate, the southern bastion of the rebels. With indiscriminate violence, civilian pressure and abandonment by their external patrons, the rebel leaders were forced to the negotiating table. This ultimately led to their capitulation in early July. In return for their surrender, the ex-rebel leaders obtained from Russia a set of verbal promises. These involved the release of detainees from Daraa and Quneitra, the return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their homes, the return of government institutions¹ and the provision of services, settling the status of defectors, deserters and draft evaders through a ‘reconciliation process,’ incorporating ex-rebels into the Russian-sponsored 5th Corps, allowing dismissed government employees to return to their posts and merging the government and opposition councils into a joint body.²

More than a year after the Government of Syria (GoS) re-took control of Daraa, the articles of the agreement remain either fully ignored or only partially fulfilled. Today, the political and military landscapes in Daraa are complex. The governorate appears far from stable and more chaos is expected down the road. This paper traces recent developments in Daraa governorate and proposes an analytical framework to better understand variations in security, service delivery and the roles of civilian and military intermediaries. Using this framework, it examines in-depth the situations in three zones of the governorate: eastern Daraa, western Daraa and Daraa city.

Unless otherwise noted or cited, the data presented in this paper come from multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews that took place between May and October 2019. The interviewees were purposively sampled (i.e. not randomly) and include senior military officers, reconciled rebels, 5th Corps soldiers and civilians in Daraa governorate. Given the current situation in the governorate, and in order to guarantee the safety of the interviewees, no names or dates are cited. In some cases, the exact locations of the interviewees are also withheld at their request.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, ‘government institutions’ refers to civilian institutions at the local level: municipality and city councils, and any other civilian institution that provides basic services such as, electricity, water, the post and schools.

² Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations,” Working Paper, (Florence: European University Institute, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/2CDpfK>

1. Governance and Security: The Impact of Intermediaries

During civil wars, not only rebel groups govern civilians but many other actors may intervene and add extra ‘layers’ of governance.³ In Syria’s rebel-held areas, many non-state actors (civilian administrations, NGOs, diasporas, rebel groups) took an upper hand governing the territory and population. However, evidence suggests that the GoS penetrated and remotely managed some services delivered to civilians residing in the rebel-held areas of Daraa governorate. In many instances, the GoS controlled electricity and water supplies, kept the schools open and regulated the payment of public sector salaries during the years of rebellion. In July 2018, the return of all the government institutions and the provision of essential services were amongst the promises made in the Russian-brokered negotiations between the GoS and former rebel leaders. Following this agreement, government institutions have reopened their doors in Daraa and begun providing services using the resources available, such as civil registries, schools, municipalities, the post, electricity and water. Although the institutions have been operating since then, there is regional variation in their performance and their interactions with the local populace.

In order to unpack the black box of these interactions, this study proposes a micro-level analysis identifying new forms of interactions between the state and society. The notion of local intermediaries seems central to a better understanding of how local-level interactions influence state governance. While the role of local intermediaries in post-2011 Syria has already been examined,⁴ this paper contributes by broadening the notion of intermediaries to include not only civil actors (e.g. notables, traders, religious figures) but also military ones.

In this paper, an *intermediary* is to be understood as a civil or military actor that occupies a position between the local populace and local institutions and voices the concerns of the former to the latter. The paper does not, however, deal with the role such intermediaries play in solving intra-societal conflicts. There are two factors that shape civilian decisions to opt for an intermediary to channel their concerns to local institutions or alternatively to take civilian initiatives to contribute to local governance: availability and effectiveness. While *availability* refers to the existence of an intermediary in a given community and civilian accessibility to it, the *effectiveness* of an intermediary is measured by the receptiveness of government institutions or the state central authorities to the concerns expressed to them. In other words, an intermediary is *effective* when local institutions respond to civilian concerns raised by the intermediary and *ineffective* when such concerns are ignored.

The framework proposed in this paper therefore takes into account the following factors: (1) the main armed actor(s) in control; (2) the *availability* of a civilian or military intermediary; (3) the extent to which a particular intermediary is *effective*; and (4) alternative civilian approaches when an intermediary actor is non-existent or is *available* but *ineffective*. Considering these factors, Daraa’s localities can be categorised into the three main patterns shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Intermediary Availability-Effectiveness and the Main Zones in Daraa

		Availability	
		Yes	No
Effectiveness	Yes	Zone A - Eastern Daraa	N/A
	No	Zone C - Daraa al-Balad	Zone B - Western Daraa

³ On the notion of ‘multi-layered governance,’ 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.

⁴ Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, eds., *Local Intermediaries in Post-2011 Syria: Transformation and Continuity* (Beirut: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2019).

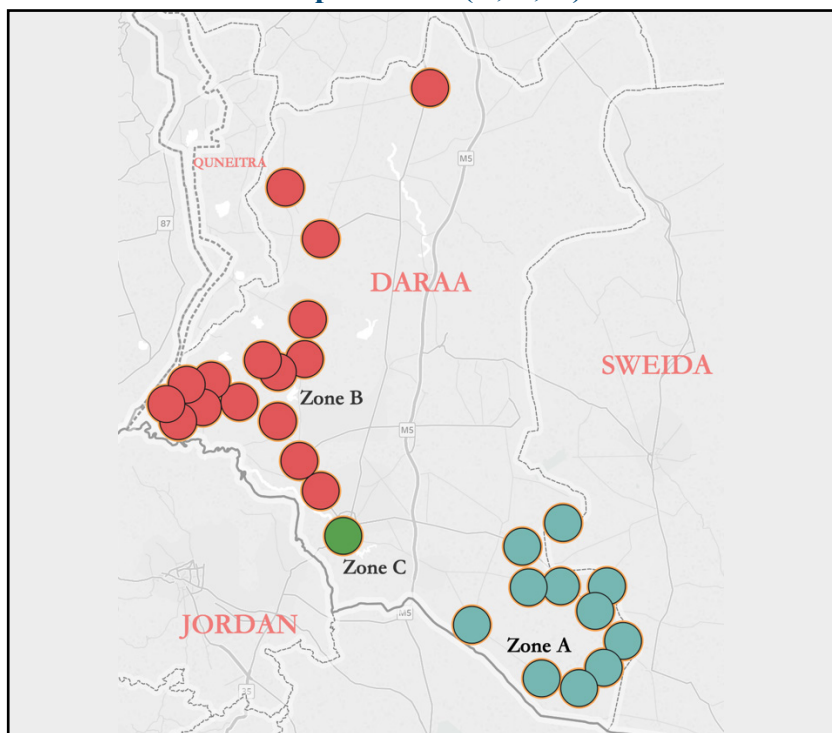
Although this typology is not representative of all the Daraa localities, it sheds light on three main local configurations and is likely to capture the reality of the wide range of local dynamics and civilian preferences in Daraa following the return of state rule.

Zone A covers localities in the eastern region of Daraa, where the 8th Brigade of the Russian-backed 5th Corps is the key armed actor. In this zone, better service delivery and security are more likely. The 8th Brigade constitutes an *available* and *effective* military actor that civilians use to voice their concerns with respect to state governance.

Zone B is in the western region of Daraa, where several armed actors affiliated to the GoS, such as some units of the SAA and a wide range of state security apparatuses, are present, active and in competition. In these areas, there is poor state governance, a deterioration in the security situation and a rise of political violence. In this zone, there are no intermediaries between the local populace and the GoS and civil resistance movements against the GoS and civilian initiatives frequently emerge.

Zone C covers localities, such as Daraa al-Balad, where former, yet lightly armed, rebels still exist under the supreme control of the state authorities. In these localities, civilians have intermediary actors who are *available* yet *ineffective* and governance is poor. As in Zone B, civil resistance movements against the GoS and collective civilian initiatives in governance-related activities are more likely.

Map 1. Zones (A, B, C)



Source: The author

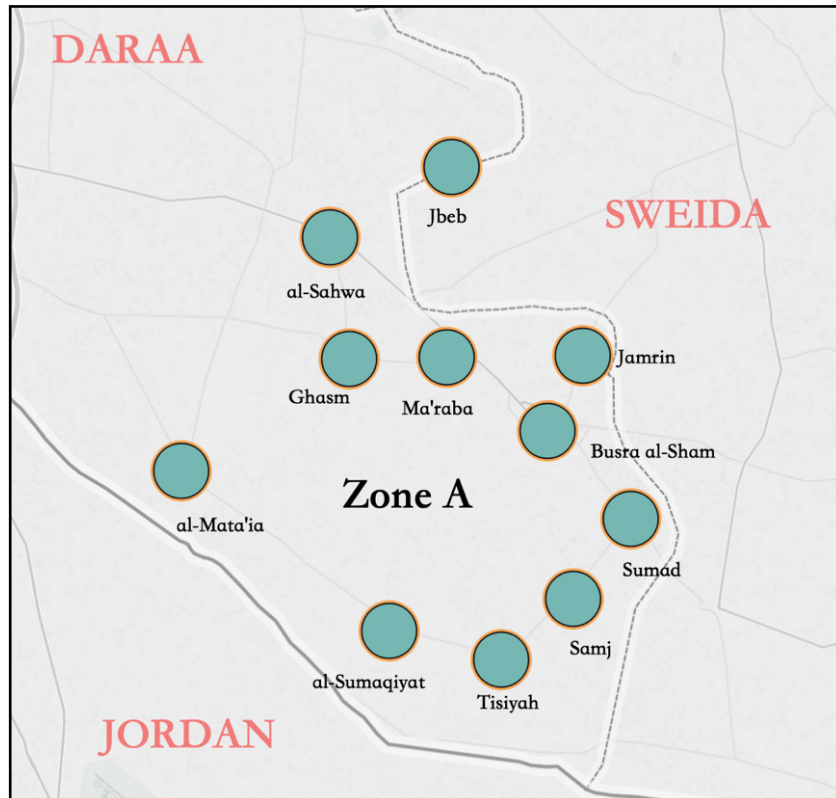
2. Zone A: Eastern Daraa

This zone covers swathes of territory in eastern Daraa governorate adjacent to Sweida governorate and the Jordanian border. It includes localities such as Busra al-Sham, Ma'raba, Ghasm, Sumad, al-Mata'ia, and al-Sahwa (see Map 2). Zone A is under the control of the 8th Brigade⁵ of the

⁵ Locally known as *Liwa 'Usud al-Harb* (or Lions of War Brigade).

Russian-sponsored 5th Corps, which is the main armed force deployed in the zone. The Brigade was established in October 2018 and is led by Ahmad al-Oda, the former leader of the disbanded *Quwwat Shabab al-Sunna* (QSS) rebel organisation. It is headquartered in the town of Busra al-Sham. As of October 2019, the number of 8th Brigade fighters slightly exceeds 1500. Besides civilian volunteers, more than 75 percent of its members are former rebels who have undergone a process of ‘rebel military integration.’⁶

Map 2. Zone A Localities



Source: The author

Today, the 8th Brigade is the chief armed actor in zone A and is responsible for preserving order and security by establishing checkpoints and running regular patrols. The SAA and state security apparatuses are prohibited from entering its localities, thanks to Russia in fulfilling this article reached in the July 2018 negotiations. As Russia has instructed the 8th Brigade to pay great attention to security measures, the localities in this zone enjoy better security compared to other regions in Daraa governorate, where kidnappings, assassinations and guerrilla attacks have become increasingly prevalent. Nevertheless, this zone is not completely immune from violence and it witnessed a reported attack on 13 July 2019, when a patrol affiliated to the Russian Military Police was targeted with an IED between al-Sahwa and Busra al-Sham by an unknown party, with no casualties, however.

The 8th Brigade treats the localities it controls as fortresses where civilians enjoy protection from the SAA. As of October 2019, no incidents of forced recruitment into the SAA have been reported, with the exception of prisoners who were immediately conscripted following the termination of their sentences and individuals who chose to perform their military service in the SAA. However, it is estimated that 300 of these deserted their units and sheltered in the 8th Brigade localities between July 2018 and October 2019 after they were informed of their potential deployment to participate in the battle against rebels active in Idlib governorate.

⁶ For a detailed study on the 5th Corps and the 8th Brigade in Daraa, see Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria,” Research Project Report (European University Institute, May 2019), <https://bit.ly/2PKA78N>

Civilians also enjoy protection from state arrest and detention, not only inside their localities but also on the roads connecting them. For instance, in March 2019 the 8th Brigade received several complaints from civilians and truck drivers about harassment and extortion at an Air Force Intelligence checkpoint near al-Sahwa. Members of the 8th Brigade were deployed and gave a time limit for the checkpoint to be removed, allegedly after beating its members. In sum, “thanks to them [8th Brigade fighters], eastern Daraa is the safest area compared to other areas in Daraa ... way better than areas controlled by the Syrian regime’s army,” according to an inhabitant of Busra al-Sham.

In addition, the command of the 8th Brigade plays an important intermediary role between locals and the GoS. Many civilians from the eastern region of Daraa have approached al-Oda asking him to intervene on behalf of arrested relatives through his connections with the Russian Military Police or directly with Damascus. “He [al-Oda] was able to release some people directly by communicating with the regime in Damascus,” a civilian from eastern Daraa stated.⁷

In the same zone, which was not exposed to the same high level of damage as other regions in Daraa governorate, the government institutions are currently delivering better basic services. The return of GoS institutions went smoothly mainly because, first, these localities immediately agreed to engage in the Russian-sponsored talks and therefore avoided the complete demolition of their infrastructure during the June 2018 military campaign and, second, the GoS’s institutions co-opted governance projects previously installed by the opposition’s local councils and NGOs.

A good example of this zone is Busra al-Sham town, which was the location of the negotiations between rebels and Russia in 2018. The prompt surrender of the former rebel leader, al-Oda, in late June 2018 helped the town avoid the destruction of its infrastructure and institutions. Government premises, the main hospital, wells, schools and other infrastructure were untouched by the Russian-backed GoS military campaign. Consequently, the GoS swiftly took over these institutions, returned some of their dismissed employees to post and telecommunication centre, and began delivering aid and providing services. Since July 2018, water and electricity establishments, the police station, the civil registry and schools have been operating inside the town. The water establishment, for instance, began operating in the town and co-opted the water plan previously implemented by the Busra al-Sham opposition local council and the *A’faq al-Moustaqbal* organisation, which piped water from wells located in Sumad to the centre of the town. As one local explained, “it was not hard for the Syrian regime to continue providing services here. Nothing was destroyed when the institutions entered.”

Since September 2018, the new-elected municipality has also implemented several projects funded by Daraa Governorate Council to restore infrastructure. These include, but are not limited to, paving roads inside and outside the town, installing road lights, mending sewers and pumping water from wells outside the town. The municipality coordinates with the Syrian Red Crescent to deliver humanitarian aid. It has also taken measures to revive the town’s economy, for example by promoting the ‘Busra Shopping Festival’ in August 2019, in which more than 90 businesses were invited to participate. To promote tourism, the municipality has helped by reopening the Roman Theatre in Busra and it welcomed two batches of Italian tourists in summer 2019.

Indeed, in Busra al-Sham civilians benefit from basic service provision. They have access to drinking water, the schools are open, from primary schools to high schools, and electricity has been restored with residents having four hours of supply followed by cuts of one or two hours. With the restored infrastructure, old and new restaurants and cafes are now open for locals and visitors, thus contributing to improving the economic situation. Today, civilians strongly believe that there are no alternatives

⁷ Even civilians from the western region of Daraa have approached al-Oda with the same purpose. “I know a few stories of people coming from the western region of Daraa to meet al-Oda asking him to help release people from detention ... not sure, but I later heard that he was able to.” Interview with a civilian from eastern Daraa.

to the government institutions. This conviction mostly results from them witnessing deteriorating governance in the areas beyond the control of the 8th Brigade. While they do not participate in decision-making in local institutions, they accept the 8th Brigade's local leadership influencing their policies and their implementation. As the commanders and the vast majority of the fighters in the 8th Brigade are local ex-rebels and civilians, clan and family social networks provide civilians with a channel to voice their governance-related demands or concerns to the government institutions. Being known to enjoy Russian patronage, the 8th Brigade presents itself as an intermediary actor with bargaining power.

On many occasions, civilians have approached the 8th Brigade command and reported municipality staff for ignoring their complaints. "I went to the municipality once to complain about some broken electricity cables in my street. They asked me to come back later ... When I told this to the [8th Brigade] fighters in town the cable was fixed the next morning ... Yes! They forced them to fix it," stated an inhabitant of Busra al-Sham. Civilians have also appealed to the command of the 8th Brigade to investigate cases of corruption in government institutions. "Once, a woman approached the recruitment centre in the town to get some papers for her son. She was told to pay a bribe ... She complained to al-Oda, who demanded the officer's transfer from Busra, which ultimately happened," reported a local from Busra al-Sham. Moreover, the 8th Brigade command also supported notables who took the upper hand in negotiations over the return of the town's Shia residents, after the Baath Party branch – which had re-opened its doors in the city – failed to do so.

While civilians perceive the 8th Brigade as an effective intermediary through which they can voice their individual or collective concerns, the employees of the local institutions also value the presence and cooperation of the 8th Brigade. For them, prompt responses to governance-related matters raised by the 8th Brigade are necessary for general order and personal security. As a government employee from the eastern region of Daraa stated, "we meet with them [the 8th Brigade command] as they interact with people every day and they know their needs ... We cooperate a lot. They tell us about water and electricity issues and we respond directly with the available resources ... This is the least we can do ... Do not forget that they protect us and our premises too." According to a member of the 8th Brigade, fighters run patrols and establish checkpoints "to provide security for the population and the staff of government institutions from explosions, kidnappings, assassinations and from any potential attack carried out by unknown gunmen ... they know we protect them, so they always welcome us in their offices."

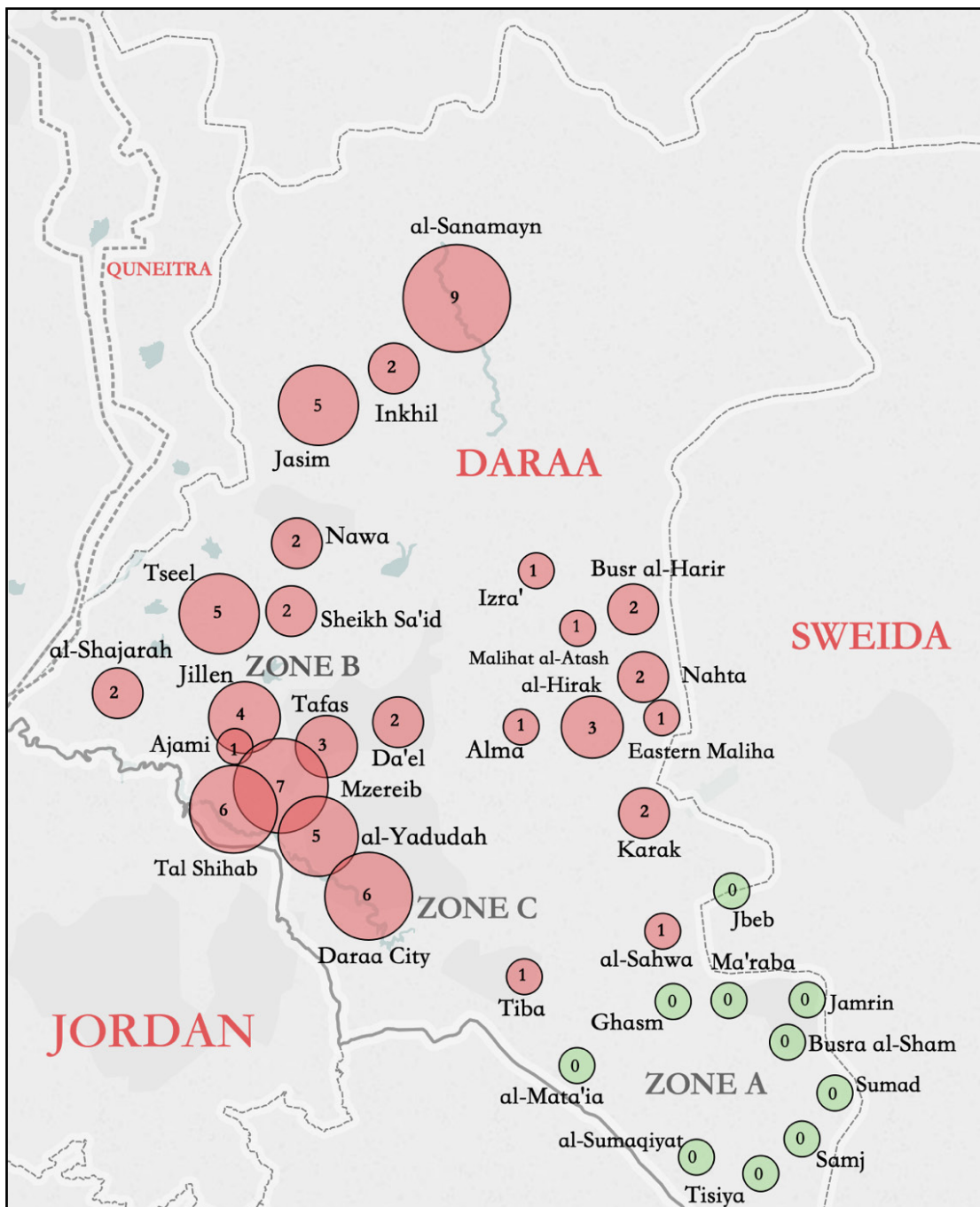
3. Zone B: Western Daraa

While civilians residing in areas controlled by the 8th Brigade enjoy services and relative prosperity, in the western region of Daraa local institutions struggle to meet basic civilian needs. This is for three main reasons. First, the infrastructure in these areas underwent partial or complete destruction in the June 2018 military campaign. Second, multiple competing security actors such as the SAA and a wide range of state security apparatuses have decreased security and undermined governance. Third, there is no effective intermediary channel through which civilians can voice their concerns and pressure local institutions to implement governance-related projects. As a result, the area is likely to witness tension and confrontations between the local population and the armed actors, and collective initiatives to meet basic needs of the inhabitants.

In the western region of Daraa, the state has regained control mostly through military operations rather than through negotiations and no single actor controls security. Despite being affiliated to the state, a wide range of actors are involved in a complex battle for influence. SAA units (e.g. the 4th and 9th Divisions), the Military Security branch, Air Force Intelligence, the State Security branch and Hezbollah are all present and active, not only at the entrances to localities but also inside them.

Political violence has been increasingly rampant. Dozens of cases of robbery, banditry and mugging have been reported. Moreover, at least 75 incidents of IED attacks, unclaimed hit-and-run assaults and assassinations took place between July and October 2019 killing nearly 100 individuals of different profiles (e.g. reconciled rebels, government officials and members of the SAA and security apparatuses) (see Map 3). A large number of checkpoints have been erected between and within localities and dozens of arrests have targeted ex-rebels, former military deserters and evaders, and even ordinary civilians who have joined the SAA or one of the security apparatuses. This chaotic situation is exacerbated by the presence of Islamic State (IS) sleeper cells in Daraa. On 11 October 2019, a Syrian-Russian joint patrol was targeted by an IED explosion between the cities of Inkhil and Jasim and IS claimed responsibility. While the overall increasing violence is not necessarily politically motivated and may relate to private conflicts, these actions signal the presence of a latent rebellion, a situation that the GoS has not witnessed in other ‘reconciliation’ areas elsewhere in Syria.

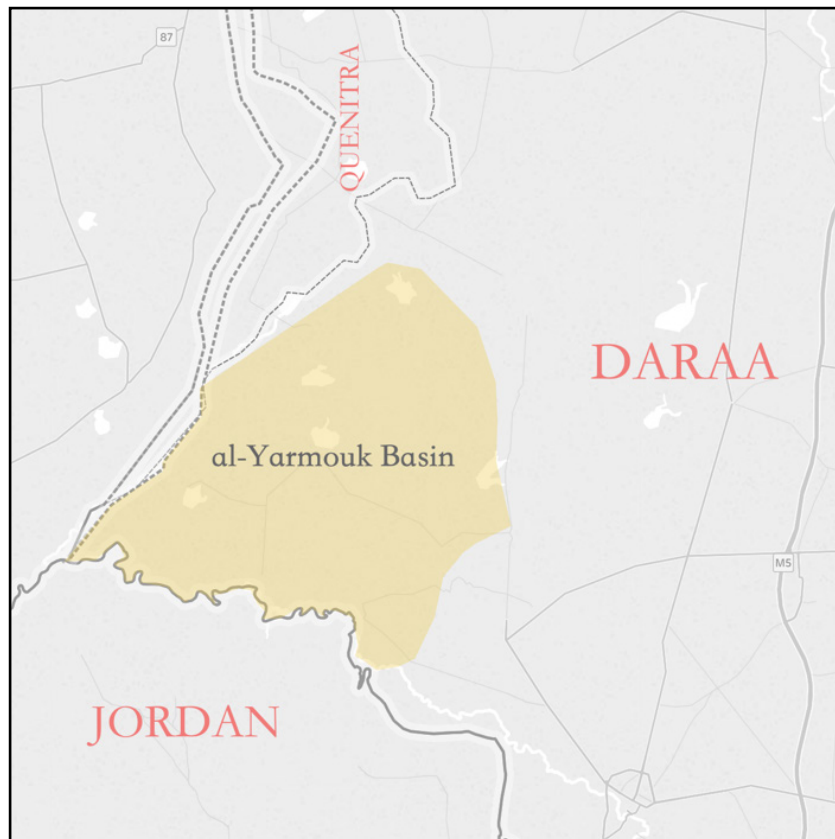
Map 3. Numbers of Attacks Reported Between July and October 2019



Source: The author

One example of this situation is the al-Yarmouk basin, which was controlled by the IS-affiliated *Jayish Khalid bin al-Walid* (JKBW) rebel group until July 2018. As a result of the military campaign that defeated the group, hospitals, schools, wells, field hospitals and power stations in and around the area were severely damaged and looted. Since the defeat of JKBW, government institutions have reopened their doors, but they remain inefficient. In contrast with zone A, the security situation represents an additional obstacle in civilians' struggle for basic services. Continual arrests have targeted ex-rebels and deserters who joined the SAA or one of the security apparatuses in the hope of gaining access to better services. Civilian movements are restricted by fear of checkpoints and detentions. "I have no access to fuel because I do not have a 'smart card' ... I couldn't go to Tseel city to get this card. You know why? There is a nearby checkpoint that has a list of names, and I am afraid that my name is on it," stated a resident in the al-Yarmouk basin.

Map 4. Al-Yarmouk Basin, Daraa Governorate



Source: The author

Another difference with respect to zone A is a strong comeback of Baath Party branches in the western region of Daraa. While the party's interaction with locals in Busra al-Sham was limited to unsuccessful negotiations over the return of Shia residents, party branches have been revived in the al-Yarmouk basin. They welcome new registration applications and run meetings and celebrations. For instance, the Baath Vanguard organisation, which is the Baath scout group for primary school students, has resumed recruiting young people by hosting theatre and music events.

Furthermore, a weak performance of the municipalities in the al-Yarmouk basin is evident. They have requested the Syrian Red Crescent to deliver more aid, as current levels of assistance remain "irregular and insufficient," according to one of the residents. The activities of the municipalities do not go beyond irregular distributions of flour and bread, temporarily servicing roads, providing a modest electricity supply (4 hours per day) and maintaining communication towers. A resident of al-Qusayr city stated that the localities in the al-Yarmouk basin have "nothing related to the necessities

of life.” In fact, an interviewee who inquired about measures to restore electricity and water supplies was told by a municipality employee that the GoS has not started implementing any large-scale projects because “it does not have the capacity or the financial resources to do that.” An insufficient number of state employees in the region represents another challenge. Unlike in Busra al-Sham, many government employees in western Daraa have been “dismissed from their jobs, either because of their political activism against the Syrian regime or because they stopped working for more than 15 days,” a resident reported.

The only central authority measures evident have been to assist peasants to revive agriculture in the region. At the request of the municipalities and often by extracting bribes from peasants to do the job, SAA units started de-mining agricultural land in October 2018. At least 10 members of the engineering units have been killed removing mines planted by JKBW. Moreover, between October 2018 and August 2019 nearly 45 civilians, some of whom were peasants working on their land, were killed in mine explosions. Fear of meeting a similar fate, the risk of being arrested, extensive damage to their land, the expense of transportation to bring materials for cultivation and to take crops to markets and a spread of agricultural pests have all discouraged peasants from carrying out agricultural activities.

In zone B localities, the absence of effective intermediaries leaves civilians with the only option of taking collective initiatives. In some towns and villages, informal initiatives based on family ties have emerged to find short-term alternatives because of the local institutions’ inability to carry out governance-related duties. For example, in many localities in al-Yarmouk basin, civilians have decided to remove rubble themselves, reconstruct their homes and repair local infrastructure (mend streets and restore electricity supplies), often using their savings.

While civilians may bypass government institutions and carry out governance-related activities themselves, they are not bystanders when facing insecurity and may opt for defiance when they are threatened. In late September 2019, a few former rebels and civilians were arrested at a checkpoint located between Tseel and Saham al-Jawlan towns staffed by members of the Air Force Intelligence. As a response, civilians from these two localities plus others from al-Qusayr and Heit established checkpoints a few meters away from the security apparatus ones to demand the release of the detainees, but without success. The security apparatus did not respond to the civilian demands but deployed more people on its checkpoints.

4. Zone C: Daraa al-Balad

While there is an effective military intermediary in zone A, in zone C areas a civilian intermediary is present to receive civilian complaints, but it is ineffective at pushing the GoS and local institutions to listen and respond, as several interviewees reported. The neighbourhood of Daraa al-Balad in Daraa city, which was the epicentre of the rebellion, offers an illustration of this pattern.⁸

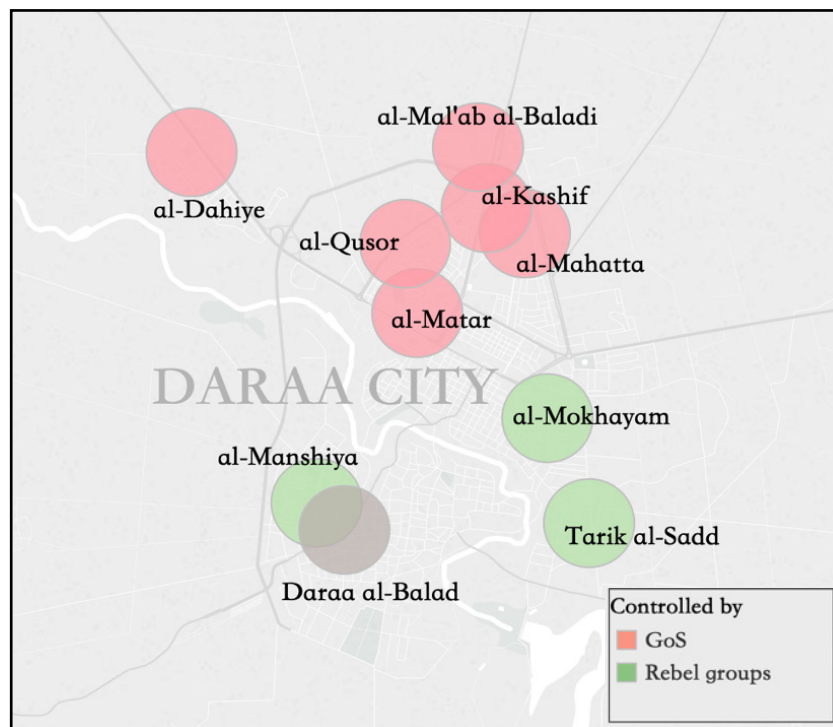
When the SAA began its military campaign in June 2018, rebel groups were still in control of portions of Daraa city such as Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sadd and al-Mukhayam (see Map 5). On 20 June 2018, several rebel operation rooms came together and formed the Central Military Operations Room (COMP) to organise their military efforts and confront the military assault on southern Syria.⁹

⁸ During the Syrian rebellion, the city was divided into neighbourhoods controlled by the SAA (part of al-Mahatta, al-Kashif, al-Qusour, al-Dhahya, al-Matar, al-Mal’ab and al-Baladi) and others controlled by rebel groups (part of al-Mahatta, al-Manshiya, Tariq al-Sadd and al-Mukhayam). Government institutions continued to function in the SAA-controlled neighbourhoods during the conflict.

⁹ The groups involved were al-Bunyan al-Marsous, Ras al-Sufouf, Tawheed al-Sufouf, Sadh al-Ghuzat, Muthallath al-Mawt, al-Nasr al-Moubien and Sadh al-Bughat.

As Russia inflicted heavy aerial bombardments while making offers of ‘reconciliation,’ the rebel leaders were coerced to the negotiating table. On 3 July 2018 towards the end of the negotiations, the COMP established a Central Negotiations Committee (CNC) to continue dialogue with Russia and ensure the implementation of the Russian promises.

Map 5. Territorial Control in Daraa City, June 2018



Source: The author

The CNC is mainly concentrated in Daraa al-Balad and Tafas. It is composed of twelve members including ex-rebel leaders (e.g. Adhm al-Akrad and Abu Murshid al-Baradan), former local activists, notables and lawyers (e.g. Adnan al-Masalmeh). Since summer 2018, the CNC has communicated with Russia and the GoS, attempting to solve issues such as the release of detainees, the fate of draft evaders and defectors, the return of dismissed government employees to their jobs and the improvement of basic services.

According to the results of the negotiations, government institutions should have begun delivering services to Daraa al-Balad soon after its surrender. However, one and half years later the performance of local institutions was assessed as “inefficient” and “corrupt” by most of the inhabitants of this district interviewed. Notably, in Daraa city the council is carrying out regular work in the neighbourhoods of the city which remained outside rebel control during the conflict: the roads are paved, trash collection is regular, and electricity is available for 3 hours followed by 3-hour cuts. By contrast, in Daraa al-Balad the main roads are poorly paved and the secondary roads are completely neglected, gas cylinders are rarely available with nepotism playing a role in their distribution, and repairing damage to electricity, water and phone networks is only slowly and intermittently ongoing. Residents also suffer from a lack of access to health care since the GoS has cut medication supplies to its dispensary in the district and civilians are reluctant to go to the national hospital in Daraa for fear of arrest.

Many civilians perceive that local institutions are significantly reluctant to carry out governance-related duties in Daraa al-Balad “because the regime wants to humiliate and take revenge on the cradle of the Syrian revolution,” as an interviewee from Daraa city stated. Moreover, another civilian in the city accused the GoS of “running reconstruction planning at the expense of poor civilians as

a punitive measure against those who supported factions [rebel groups].” For instance, in October 2019, the head of the Electricity Directorate demanded payment of the electricity bills accumulated over recent years by the inhabitants of former rebel-held neighbourhoods. Moreover, checkpoints stationed in the outskirts of the city have been utilised to force civilians to pay these bills. In many cases, civilians are asked about their electricity and water bills at checkpoints and are prevented from entering the city of Daraa until they pay their dues. With electricity rationing allowing just one hour of supply followed by a five-hour cut in Daraa al-Balad, the CNC intervened to object and to voice the civilians’ refusal to pay. Members of the CNC attempted to meet the governor, Khalid al-Hannous, to negotiate the decision but instead were threatened with a complete power cut if the backlog was not paid. With no change in the GoS’s position, the response of the CNC is limited to condemnations posted by a few of its members on their social media accounts. Adham al-Akrad, a former rebel leader and CNC member, wrote on his Facebook page “What al-Hannous could not get by force he cannot get through extortion of services. [We have] corrupt institutions and bureaucratic and obsolete establishments that are not suitable for this period.”

The local populace views the CNC as an available intermediary but one which is ineffective vis-à-vis the state authorities. An interviewee from Daraa city stated “They [CNC] listen to the people and support their demands. They are doing their best to solve our matters, but we rarely see an outcome.” Indeed, CNC members receive civilians’ complaints and are the main interlocutors of Russian and Syrian officials. During field visits conducted by Russian military officers, CNC members raise civilian concerns about arrests and service provision. They also meet with GoS officials and military and security figures. For instance, in April 2019 CNC members met the Minister of Defence, Lieutenant General Ali Ayoub, and the head of Military Intelligence, Major General Kifah Melhem, to deliver civilian requests regarding detainees, defectors and evaders, to try to halt arrests and to describe the inefficient service delivery. Despite their efforts to communicate civilian resentment, their mediation is not successful in providing the local populace with solutions. A local from Daraa city explained “All we hear is ‘the municipality does not have money to improve governance in Daraa al-Balad,’ ‘Russia promised to look into the services issue’ and ‘regime security figures said releasing detainees and solving defection and draft-evasion cases will take time.’... These are the answers we always hear from them [CNC members], no real outcome to their meetings.”

The ineffectiveness of the CNC can be viewed as due to two main factors. The first is a state aim to undermine the CNC’s legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and break the vertical ties between them by attracting ex-rebels from the area to join state military and security forces. For instance, an interviewee from the city claimed that Mustafa al-Kasim, a former rebel leader in Daraa city, was encouraged by the Military Security branch which has checkpoints around Daraa al-Balad to “pressure locals and force them to give up on the CNC.” Second, the overall ineffectiveness of the CNC as an intermediary is also caused by its lack of genuine Russian support, especially as it has members in local politics who are, in the eyes of Russia, seen as not reliable due to their behaviour during the negotiations in summer 2018 (e.g. al-Akrad).¹⁰

Stuck between the ineffectiveness of the CNC and the municipal policy of ‘collective punishment’ of Daraa al-Balad, civilians have used gatherings such as those during prayers at mosques to take local initiatives and collect funds to carry out simple tasks. According to a few interviewees from the city, some solidarity-based initiatives have been successful in collecting small amounts of money to do some interior restoration of al-Omari mosque and to restore electricity supplies in the area. They have also encouraged civilians to collectively take trash from residential neighbourhoods to nearby landfills. These initiatives have often been in conjunction with civil resistance against the GoS. Tens of civilians in Daraa al-Balad neighbourhood have taken to the streets on many occasions

¹⁰ On the link between the behaviour of rebel leaders during the negotiations in June/July 2018 and Russian protection and patronage, see Al-Jabassini, ‘From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa, Southern Syria’

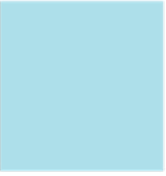
and demanded the release of detainees, denounced corruption and in many instances called for the overthrow of the Syrian regime. As the local population lacks actual bargaining power, the CNC has capitalised on this growing civilian agency and used it as a tool to pressure state officials and threaten them with mobilisation and escalation. For example, the Syrian Air Force Intelligence had to release a doctor and his brother who were arrested on their way to northern Syria in September 2019, because the CNC threatened to trigger protests in the city of Daraa.

Conclusion

Nowadays, whenever governance and reconstruction in Daraa governorate are discussed, it is common to hear that “the governorate is not secure” and “GoS representatives have emphasised that the state suffers from a scarcity of resources to solve service-delivery matters.” It is true that the security situation in the governorate remains volatile and unstable, the GoS has struggled to fill the vacuum left by previous service providers (e.g. NGOs) and its service delivery remains, to a large degree, slow and ineffective. Nevertheless, variations in state governance across Daraa are evident. The armed actor in control, the overall security situation, the availability of infrastructure and the possibility of capitalising on previous projects installed by NGOs or opposition local councils are a few examples of factors that explain variations in governance and security across the regions of Daraa today. In addition, the presence of a civilian or military intermediary to voice concerns raised by the local population appears to play a key role in service delivery too.

In Daraa, military intermediaries appear to surpass civilian ones in their effectiveness. Rebel groups are more likely to obtain a military intermediary position in post-rebellion Syria if they undergo integration into the 5th Corps. In such cases, Russian patronage appears to give intermediaries bargaining power when speaking for the local population on matters concerning governance and security in the post-conflict configuration. As a result, areas controlled by the 8th Brigade enjoy better services and security situations than areas where the local populace is faced with the ineffectiveness of the CNC or does not have an intermediary at all. In the last two cases, civilians do not remain bystanders but participate in governance from below. However, the protests taking place in the region pose a new challenge to the GoS and the overall stabilisation process in Daraa. This is more likely to be exacerbated if the GoS does not take effective measures to improve governance and security.

The departure point for stabilising Daraa is to revisit the Russian-brokered negotiations and to work towards the implementation of all the articles agreed. Without that, we are likely to witness an increase in political violence and the emergence of spoilers who find potential grassroots to undermine stabilisation efforts in Daraa.



Research Project Report
4 November 2019
2019/15



ISBN:978-92-9084-797-7
doi:10.2870/964896



Publications Office
of the European Union