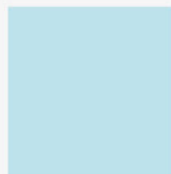




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**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**



Research Project Report
07 April 2020
2020/06



Middle
East
Directions

Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria

Abdullah Al-Jabassini

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Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria

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Executive Summary

In July 2018, the Syrian regime recaptured Daraa governorate in southern Syria. This proclaimed victory was built on two different strategies adopted to lead the rebels to surrender: a use of armed force and Russian-led negotiations. These two fundamentally divergent approaches demarcated different emerging political orders with different qualities of service delivery and security conditions. While the localities that engaged in the Russian-led negotiations and now benefit from full Russian protection are generally orderly, civilians have access to comparatively good services and security is maintained, other localities that have limited Russian protection or were regained militarily by the Syrian Arab Army endure poor service provision and civilians face uncertainty and their daily lives are plagued by rampant political violence.

An abundance of light weapons, a high number of former rebels present in the governorate, dense clan-based social networks and the accumulated experience of a decade of conflict are but some of the factors that make Daraa governorate a fertile ground for the re-emergence of violence. This paper explores three main interrelated factors underlying the rise in political violence in post-rebellion Daraa.

The first of these is an amalgamation of poor service provision, poverty, a prioritisation of security and an instrumentalisation of essential services to sanction perceived opponents. These correlated factors ignite civilian protests and underpin individuals' preferences for returning to violent resistance.

The second is the Syrian regime's 'security first' mindset in its treatment of detainees and military defectors, and the incomplete rebel integration process, which is fuelling resentment, triggering local conflicts and thereby propagating cycles of retaliation. The logic behind this manipulation is to create the necessary hostile environment to serve as a pretext for regime intervention to eliminate the remaining enclaves of defiance and resistance.

Third, the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Daraa gives rise to cyclical patterns of violence between, on the one hand, their militants and collaborators in attempts to establish a long-term foothold in the governorate and, on the other hand, civilian activists and former rebels who undermine their aspirations and voice dissent regarding their presence in Daraa.

Introduction

At their core, all civil wars are a “battle for control between a government and its competitors over civilians and the territory upon which they reside.”¹ When rebel organisations emerge and gain territorial control, they immediately become targets of violence inflicted by incumbent regimes in the struggle to recapture territory, to regain a monopoly on the use of violence and to establish the supremacy of government institutions. The ultimate triumph of the state does not, however, result in a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. As post-conflict situations are typically fragile,² states need effective strategies and measures to avoid relapsing into armed conflict (as statistics show that half of all civil wars do).³

In the course of the rebellion in Daraa governorate in southern Syria, many different insurgent organisations emerged and, over time, collectively brought more than 60% of the governorate’s territory under their control. However, in July 2018 the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), backed by Russia, was able to force Daraa’s rebel groups to capitulate and soon afterwards the Government of Syria (GoS) re-opened its civilian institutions to resume service provision to the local populace. While this general situation is often labelled a ‘return of the state,’ the indiscriminate use of this term suggests an over-simplification of the complex and disparate realities in areas where the Syrian state has claimed victory and consequently taken back control. Furthermore, it is evident that the physical return of military, security and civilian state institutions has not yet resulted in a restoration of security and stability. The re-emergence of protests and the significant increase in violence shortly after the rebels’ surrender debunk the myth of the state’s substantive victory and raise many questions about whether the rebellion in Daraa was actually quelled or whether it merely became dormant.

The rising insecurity which is increasingly dominating the landscape in Daraa provides the main impetus behind the central research question in this study: how can the relapse into violence in post-rebellion Daraa be explained? This paper first demonstrates how a particular strategy that terminated rebel rule produced distinct territorial configurations which have given rise to an imbalance in service provision and security conditions across the governorate. It argues for the existence of a robust link between people’s unresolved or aggravated grievances and higher levels of violence in areas either regained militarily by the Syrian regime or suffering from limited Russian protection. While acknowledging that interpersonal violent crimes will continue to occur in all contexts, the study focuses exclusively on incidents related to political violence.

The body of evidence for this study is primarily first-hand data collected through multiple rounds of semi-structured and follow-up interviews with senior military officers, civilians, former rebels and 5th Corps fighters, all of which took place between July 2018 and March 2020. The qualitative and quantitative data used to create maps and graphs in this paper are original and were collected by the researcher through the interviews and by consulting archival documents during the previously stated timeframe. Information on the dates, the actors involved and the location of each event, accompanied by a brief summary, was gathered, validated and then disaggregated into cohesive categories in order to test hypotheses and extract potential explanations of the resurgence of violence in Daraa. Unless otherwise stated or cited, the data presented in this paper come from interviews. Given the current situation in Daraa and in order to ensure the safety of all the interviewees, names and personal identifying information have been omitted.

¹ Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Cheria Mampilly, “Introduction,” in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, ed. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Cheria Mampilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

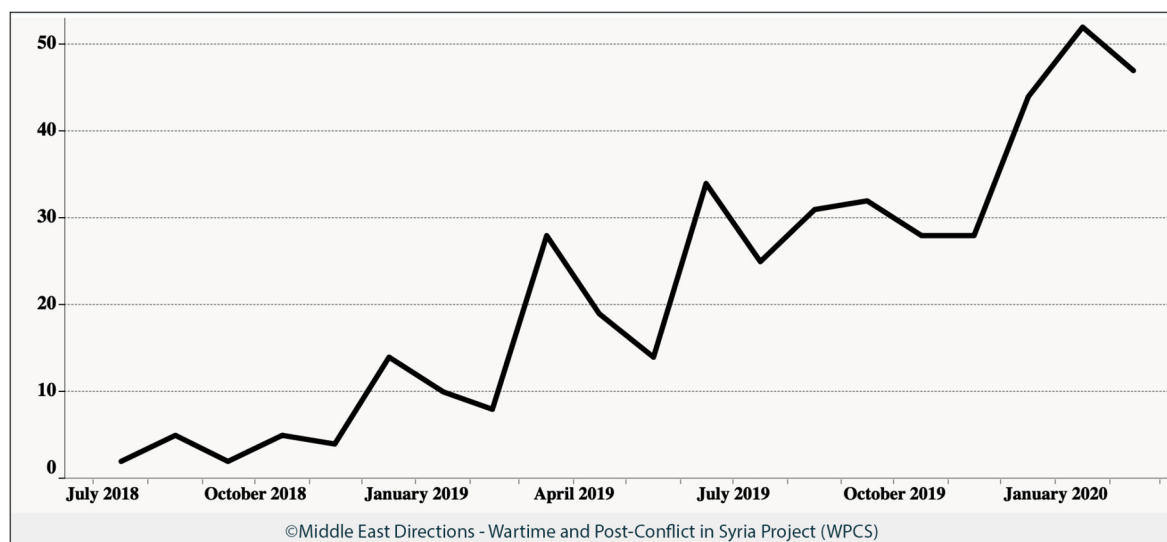
² Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler and Måns Söderbom, “Post-Conflict Risks,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 4 (2008), 461–78.

³ Between 1945 and 2009, 59 of the 103 countries (or 57%) that experienced a form of civil war subsequently suffered at least one related conflict. Barbara F. Walter, “Conflict Relapse and the Sustainability of Post-Conflict Peace,” Background Paper, World Development Report 2011, September 13, 2010, <http://bit.ly/384syzy>.

1. Patterns of Political Order and Violence in Post-rebellion Daraa

Shortly after the Syrian regime declared victory in July 2018, waves of political violence re-emerged in Daraa and quickly began to spread throughout the governorate. Hardly a day went by without locals hearing accounts of assassinations, kidnappings, IED attacks, drive-by shootings and fatalities in seemingly intentional hit-and-run incidents. At least 425 known violent incidents took place in Daraa between August 2018 and March 2020, causing the deaths of more than 380 individuals (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Recorded Violent Events in Daraa, July 2018 - March 2020

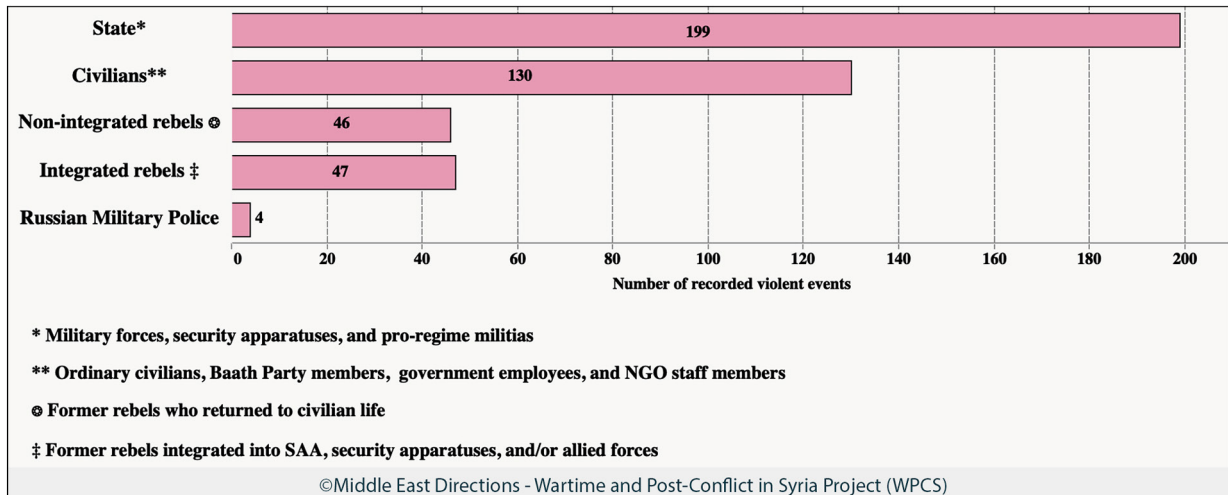


Source: The author

While the vast majority of these incidents were perpetrated by unidentified actors, two groups – the ‘Popular Resistance’ and the ‘South Companies’ – declared their emergence in late November 2018 and February 2019 respectively, and stated their intention to continue battling the Syrian regime in Daraa. Since then, the two groups have claimed responsibility for 16 violent attacks on the state and its allied forces. However, secrecy of information and the sudden significant decline in the number of attacks carried out by the two groups either suggests their preference for operating in a low-profile manner or raises questions about their actual existence, playing into the theory that the groups were machinations of the Syrian regime set up to apprehend civilians and former rebels who might still desire to take up arms again and fight the state.

Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of these incidents, which target both civilian and military actors on all sides in the developing hostilities, makes it difficult to classify all the violent events as owing to one cause or to attribute them to one actor. Civilians, NGO staff, reconciled rebels, anti-reconciliation rebels, former opposition activists, government employees, Baath Party officials, state security members, SAA soldiers and officers, Hezbollah militants and Russian Military Police have all been targets of killings and kidnappings in post-rebellion Daraa (Figure 2).

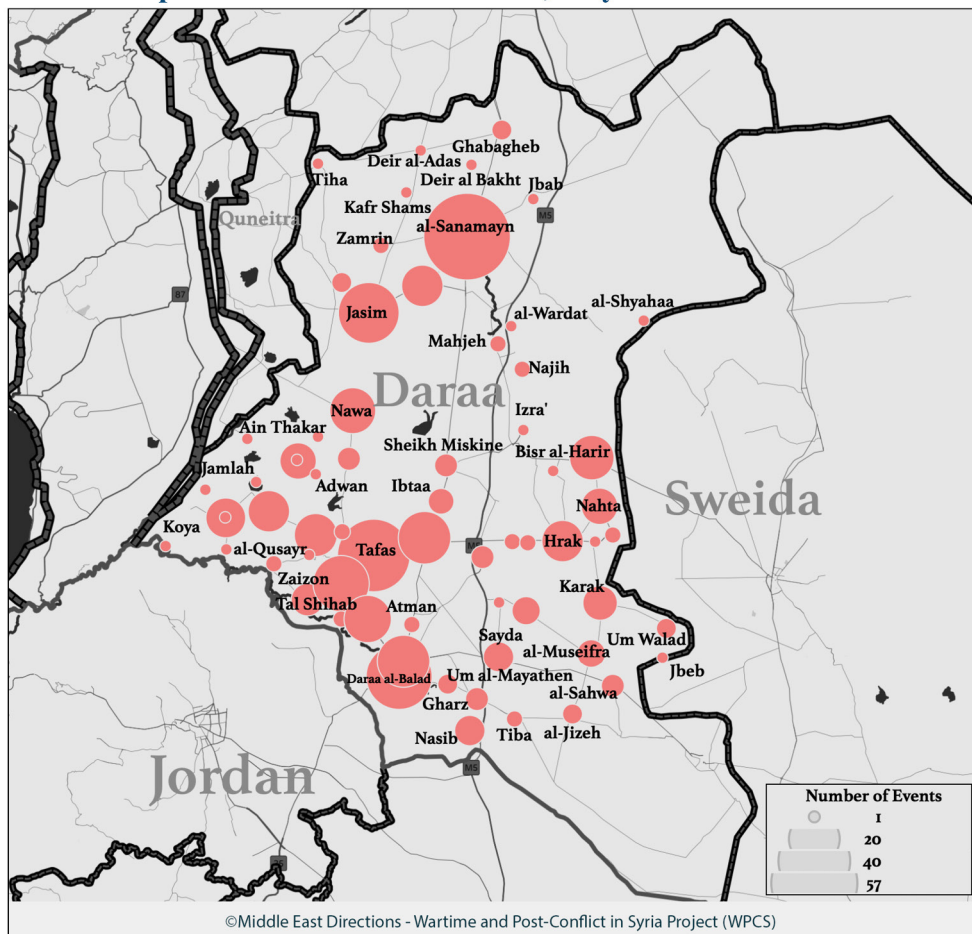
Figure 2. Targets of Violent Incidents in Daraa, July 2018 - March 2020



Source: Data collected and verified by the author

It is noteworthy that there is an apparent spatial variation in the level and intensity of violence across Daraa governorate: fewer cases have been recorded in the eastern region, while the vast majority of violent incidents have occurred in the western and central regions of Daraa (Map 1). To understand this discrepancy, it is necessary to first examine how different strategies adopted to make the rebels surrender led to the emergence of distinct political orders which in turn determine where actors are present and which territories they control.

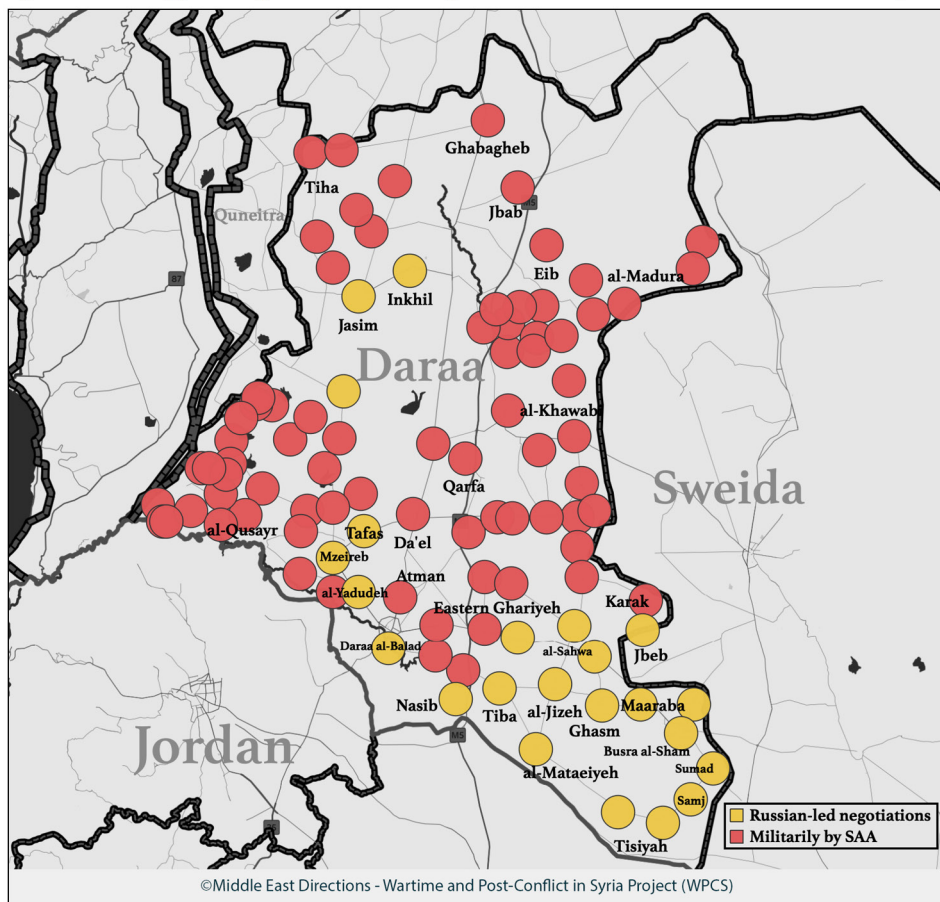
Map 1. Violent Events in Daraa, July 2018 - March 2020



Source: The author

The first strategy that compelled rebel organisations to surrender was the Syrian regime’s use of armed force, which allowed it to recapture vast swathes of Daraa’s rebel-held territory and paved the way for the return of a plethora of state-affiliated and allied armed actors (Map 2). Since July 2018, the 4th Division, Air Force Intelligence, the State Security Branch, the Military Security Branch and the Political Security Branch have all deployed additional forces in the south of Syria and subsequently swept into localities which were regained by the SAA, with no restrictions or limitations imposed on their movements. This landscape has been further complicated by the emergence of local armed groups led by reconciled rebels, local interventions by state-licensed private security companies⁴ and the expansion of Iranian-backed militias, including Hezbollah, which gained territorial access through personal connections in order to operate under the cover of the 4th Division and Air Force Intelligence to avoid Israeli strikes.

Map 2. Strategy Adopted in Ending Rebel Rule in Daraa, June - July 2018



Source: The author

The multiplication of actors, their lack of coordination and their competition for local influence and access to former rebel recruitment pools have created a space of lawlessness. Unlike the handful of localities which are controlled by a single group, a clear pattern of control is difficult to define in these territories with multiple ‘presences.’ Moreover, the unsanctioned violence which these groups inflict on civilians appears to be an integral dimension of the state’s inability to regain the monopoly over the legitimate use of force and ultimately contributes to the deterioration of security conditions. Under these circumstances, civilians struggle to ensure a level of certainty in their daily lives and can only grasp a vague understanding of these actors’ intentions towards them. As they lack an effective

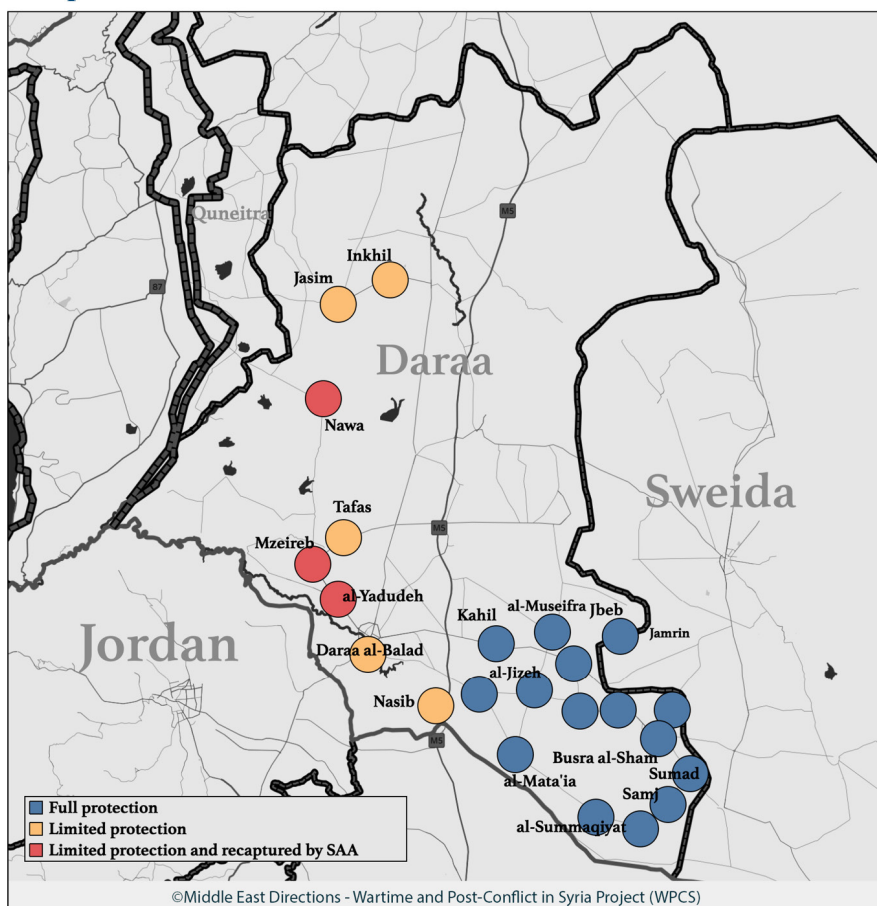
⁴ Decree No. 55 issued in August 2013 by the Syrian President legalises private security companies for protection and guarding services. See Syrian Parliament, “Legislative Decree /55/ of 2013: Granting Licenses to Private Security and Guarding Services,” Syrian Parliament, August 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2TFo3Io>.

In Daraa, Quwwat al-Qal’aa (the Castle Forces), established in 2017 and managed by Mohammed Khudhir Dhahir, has deployed its personnel to operate at the Nasib border-crossing. In many cases, Russian military police have sanctioned them for abusing and extracting money from civilians.

intermediary and third-party protection, civilians face arbitrary arrests and detentions, and are often forced to perform service delivery tasks given the absence of reliable government-operated service provision systems.

The second strategy that brought rebel rule to an end was the Russian-led negotiation initiative which for the most part focused on the eastern region of Daraa. Similar to areas retaken militarily by the SAA, government institutions have been allowed to re-open in these areas in order to deliver essential services to the local population. However, access to these localities by the state's armed and allied forces has been categorically banned by Russia, and their presence remains limited to sanctioned checkpoints stationed on the outskirts of Russian-controlled localities and at junctions which connect them to national highways. Remarkably, localities in this category fall into two further sub-categories: ones with 'full Russian protection' and ones in the more precarious situation of 'limited Russian protection' (Map 3).

Map 3. Areas of Full and Limited Russian Protection in Daraa



Source: The author

The areas with full Russian protection are collectively represented by Ahmad al-Oda, a former leader of the Sunna Youth Forces rebel group who played a key role during the surrender negotiations with the Syrian government. Al-Oda's rapid surrender, in addition to his authority to mobilise former rebels, have allowed him to obtain genuine Russian patronage and thereby be entrusted to command Daraa's 8th Brigade, a sub-unit of the Russian-sponsored 5th Corps.⁵ In these localities, civilians and former rebels enjoy protection from arbitrary state arrest and detention. The Russian Military Police and the 8th Brigade, which together possess the monopoly on the use of violence, have intervened on several occasions to confront the state military and security forces, ordering them to remove their checkpoints and refrain from committing abuses against civilians and former rebels (using armed

⁵ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria," Project Research Report (Florence: European University Institute, 14 May 2019), <http://bit.ly/2oTzoXG>.

force when needed). In view of the protection this region enjoys, cases of assassinations, kidnappings and IED attacks remain rare in comparison to other areas in Daraa governorate. Moreover, the 8th Brigade provides the local population with bargaining power to demand better service delivery and a correlated leverage to turn down offers by the Baath Party or state officials. Consequently, full Russian protection constitutes an obstacle to the Syrian regime's goal of reasserting control over local communities in Daraa.

In contrast, in areas that have limited Russian protection, armed ex-rebels who have so far failed to engage in a formal reconciliation process with the Syrian regime have clustered together into communities armed with light weapons. The defiant yet indecisive behaviour of these ex-rebels – including Adham al-Akrad and Murshid al-Baradan – during the Russian-led talks has resulted in their localities being deprived of the remit of full protection. Unlike areas relying on the 8th Brigade as an effective military intermediary, the Central Negotiations Committee (CNC) emerged in the limited-protection localities to ensure the implementation of the negotiation terms, such as the release of detainees, determination of the fates of draft evaders and the return of dismissed government employees to their jobs.⁶ The CNC has gradually become a trusted civilian intermediary that the local population can call on to voice their concerns to the government. However, without genuine Russian patronage to pressure the government to meet its demands, the CNC is decidedly ineffective and its meetings with government officials or state security officers are rarely fruitful. In a limited number of cases, the CNC has been able to mediate in the release of persons recently detained at checkpoints, but it has so far failed to mediate on wider issues pertaining to detainees and the return of dismissed employees to their jobs. Faced with Russia's reluctance to intervene beyond defusing tensions and mediating talks, these localities are more likely to be subjected to strong pressure from the Syrian regime to either force anti-reconciliation rebels to surrender and reconcile, thus allowing the SAA and the state security apparatuses to capitalise on this newly available manpower, or to reject reconciliation and thereby accept relocation to northern Syria.

This unique distribution of territorial control combined with the outcomes of the 2018 capitulation agreement and Daraa's historical clan-based social structure has created a hotbed for the resurgence of violence, a situation which the regime has not witnessed in other 'reconciled' areas in Syria. Four elements characterise this volatile situation.

First, based on the outcomes of the Russian-led negotiations, nearly 5,000 rebels were evacuated to Idlib governorate between 15 July and 12 August 2018. This number is low compared to the overall number of rebels who operated in Daraa, which exceeded 30,000. This leaves Daraa with a significant pool of latent manpower that is ready to stage retaliatory actions in the event that the state exacerbates their grievances rather than resolving them. **Second**, the resolution of the Russian-led talks required rebel leaders to surrender the heavy armaments that their organisations were in possession of. However, important numbers of former rebels stationed in areas regained either militarily or covertly through negotiations kept hold of their light weapons (e.g. Ak47s and pistols) and abjectly refused to surrender them to the Syrian state. **Third**, concepts and principles which are embedded in Daraa's strong clan-based social structure – such as honour, solidarity, collective responsibility and revenge – are strong and emotive triggers for violent actions. For instance, in solidarity with al-Sanamayn city, which was targeted by an SAA-led military offensive in February 2020, armed men launched a series of attacks against the SAA and state security apparatus checkpoints in several locations, causing damage and capturing SAA soldiers (Figure 3). **Fourth**, the guerrillas carrying out these attacks are more likely to be endogenous to their communities. Their intimate knowledge of the terrain gives them an advantage over the state and its allied forces and allows them to prepare ambushes, plant IEDs and carry out organised lightning attacks both during the day and at night.

⁶ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries," Project Research Report (Florence: European University Institute, 4 November 2019), <http://bit.ly/38eCzKA>.

Figure 3. Unidentified Gunmen Captured Two SAA Soldiers near Karak Town (left), and Members of Air Force Intelligence Checkpoint near Tafas Town (right) - March 1, 2020



Source: A local

Overall, on the basis of several rounds of semi-structured interviews, three key interrelated factors can be suggested as causes of the resurgence of violence in post-rebellion Daraa: the government's weak and discriminatory system of governance, the Syrian regime's security priorities and disputes over the presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah in the governorate.

2. Weak and Discriminatory Governance

During the Russian-led negotiations in July 2018, former rebel leaders communicated the local population's two main concerns: first, an accelerated return of government institutions to quickly reinstate service delivery; and second, to allow dismissed civil servants to return to their jobs and receive their monthly salaries. While civilians admittedly have access to better quality services in the localities benefitting from full Russian protection, frustrations with sub-par local service delivery in areas retaken militarily by the SAA or having only limited Russian protection are not always attributable to an incapacity of the government institutions to recover but may sometimes result from the Syrian regime instrumentalising essential services to sanction opponents.

2.1. The Struggle to Provide Essential Services

In basic terms, civilians in Daraa expected the government institutions to resume apolitical and equitable service delivery without any restrictions on access to healthcare, education, electricity and water. However, for nearly two years the government institutions have struggled to recover, proving incapable of filling the vacuum left by NGOs and of delivering functioning services to the local population.⁷

A July 2018 assessment of Daraa's power networks estimated that more than 90% of the overall system had been severely damaged. In response, Daraa's General Electricity Company began to dispatch workers to fix sections of the network and install electricity transformers and cables, although at a slow pace due to shortages of spare parts, cranes and electricians. In spite of this slight

⁷ In the course of the rebellion in Daraa, rebel organisations often established or allowed systems of service delivery to emerge in response to recognised civilian needs, such as education and healthcare provision. However, the systems of rebel governance in Daraa which were dismantled in July 2018 were multi-layered to the extent that they could not operate autonomously from either NGOs or the government, with the latter retaining its administrative authority over basic services in many localities (e.g. schools, dispensaries and bakeries).

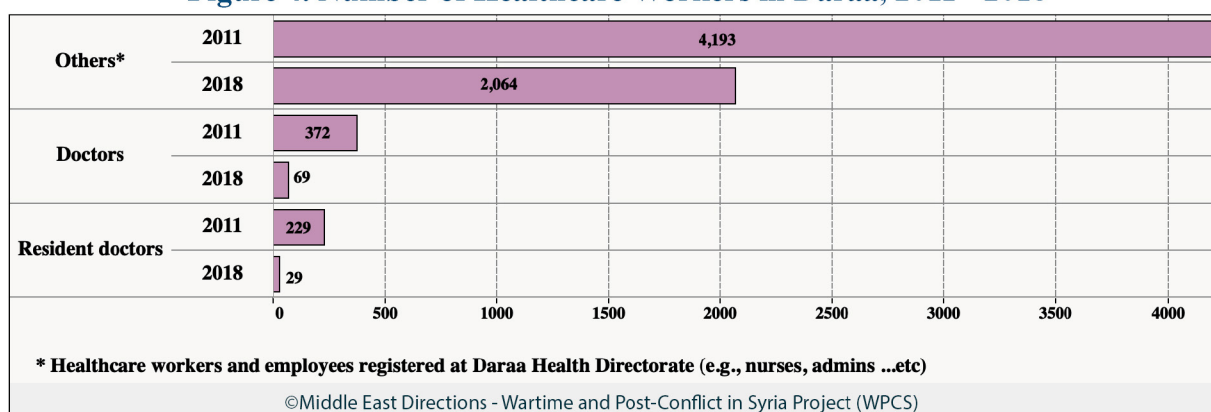
setback, by March 2020, access to power had been restored in 120 localities in Daraa. To regulate supply and demand, the government has implemented standard rationing, which allows two-hour windows of supply followed by four-hour cuts.⁸ In many localities, the timing of these supply blocks is somewhat unpredictable due to frequent electrical faults, weak electrical current, the need to reinstate additional power stations, pressure on particular electrical transformers and a multiplication of illegal connections to the power supply.

This intermittent electricity provision also interrupts the pumping and drinking water distribution systems. Because the supply of locally available drinking water is so unpredictable, many civilians pay for the alternative, which is relying on tanks that extract water from wells and deliver it to homes at a cost of roughly 5,000-7,000 SYP (10-14 USD) a month. As one interviewee from the eastern region of Daraa explained: “[m]y monthly income does not exceed 20,000 SYP, I pay around half of it to transport seven cubic metres of drinking water a month.” A second added that, “[w]e forgot about the government’s water, we now rely on water delivery ... it’s costly and not everyone can afford it, but there is no alternative.”⁹

In terms of education, school attendance and exam schedules have resumed across the governorate. However, in addition to a significant shortage of teachers, 400 of the 988 schools remain either partially or completely destroyed. The government’s lack of reconstruction capacity necessitated the intervention of a number of NGOs and UN agencies to improve the education infrastructure. In February 2020, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) partially reconstructed the al-Safsaf-Tabaraya school for Palestinian children in the Daraa al-Moukhayam area of Daraa city, while OXFAM toured western Daraa city assessing school premises and educational facilities.¹⁰

Daraa also suffers from a deteriorating healthcare system. Effective government initiatives remain limited to mobile teams for the administration of polio vaccine and the restoration of a few family health centres in areas such as Kherbet Ghazaleh, al-Shajarah, Tseel, Jasim and Nawa. While the public health sector is still suffering from infrastructure damage, a lack of medical equipment, intermittent medicine supply and a sharp shortage of medical workers (Figure 4), many citizens opt for private healthcare in hospitals in Daraa or travel to Damascus for medical examinations or surgery at skyrocketing prices. To cover the fees, a Daraa resident explained that “[s]ome people have to sell their belongings and furniture to go to a private hospital in Damascus.”

Figure 4. Number of Healthcare Workers in Daraa, 2011 - 2018



Source: The author

⁸ Except for the neighbourhoods of Daraa city where state institutions have their headquarters. These operate with a three-hour supply followed by a three-hour cut.

⁹ This problem appears to be less pronounced in the eastern region of Daraa due to its proximity to the Yarmouk Basin, where surface water is available.

¹⁰ On 19 February 2020, two OXFAM volunteers were shot and killed by unknown gunmen during their tour in the western region of Daraa.

Following the government’s confirmation, fears have been mounting in Daraa. The government dispatched medical teams to the Nasib-Jabir border crossing to examine entrants and used available resources to prepare and equip several quarantine centres across the governorate. The governor, Khalid al-Hanou, toured these quarantine centres, talking to their staff and ensuring their readiness. In some areas, and with assistance from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, municipalities have dispatched trucks to spray sanitiser on streets and buildings (Figure 5). However, concerns over the government’s ability to treat victims and prevent the spread of the virus remain significant. As one Daraa local explained, “this is the last thing we needed after 10 years of war ... because of the destruction and lack of doctors and equipment, our government will not be able to confront the virus alone. We want the world to help us ... we are tired, we want to live peacefully just for one day.”

Figure 5. Sanitizing Streets in Daraa City (top). Quarantine Centre in Kherbet Ghazaleh (left). Paramedic Scans Passengers for Signs of Fever at Nasib Border Crossing (right) - March 2020

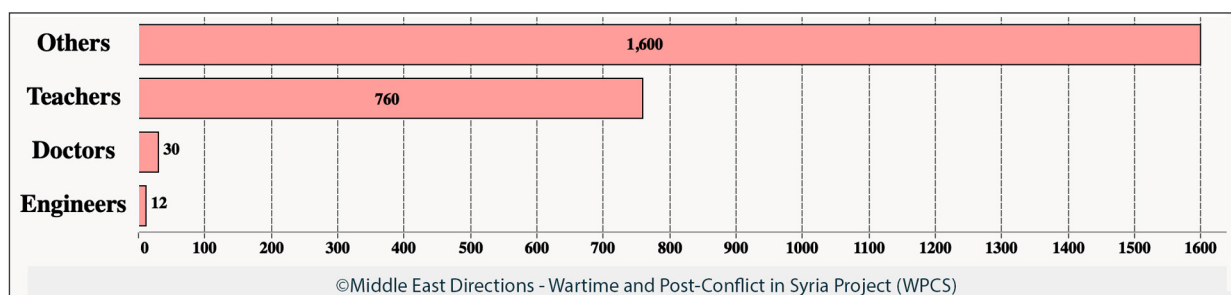


Source: A local

2.2. Dismissed Employees and Discriminatory Service Delivery

Poor service delivery in Daraa does not only result from infrastructure damage and macro-economic deterioration. The marked decline in the number of workers due to death, displacement and flight has been exacerbated by the Syrian regime’s refusal to allow many state employees to return to their jobs (Figure 6). In spite of the reconciliation process that took place, many lawyers, doctors and teachers are jobless and in limbo waiting to hear from the institutions where they were previously employed.

Figure 6. Number of Dismissed Civil Servants in Daraa Governorate



Source: The author

While some teachers and employees in the telecommunication and mail sectors in the eastern region of Daraa have been able to return to work following the Russian mediation, the vast majority of Daraa's employees are still waiting for their hearings at a disciplinary court which looks into each situation on a case by case basis. The court has so far ruled on the return to work of a few teachers, engineers and other government employees and revoked the removal of their names from the relevant syndicate lists. In some other cases, the court has ruled in favour of the reinstatement of employees but with imposition of a two- to four-year suspension as punishment for collaborating with the opposition during the rebellion. "We are speaking about hundreds of employees in addition to their families who have fallen below the poverty line ... people should not think too much of the reasons behind insecurity... hunger and poverty make criminals of good people," explained a local from Daraa.

In certain communities where unreconciled rebels reside, service delivery has also been worsened by the Syrian regime's instrumentalisation of essential services to sanction perceived opponents in the area. This tactic was easily extended into other regions as a result of Russia's decision not to intervene in matters related to service delivery beyond the eastern region of Daraa. In Jasim, for example, civilians requested the installation of more rubbish bins in the city, but the request was rejected by the municipality. In Daraa al-Balad, not only was a request by the residents for a dispensary to be built met with a flat refusal by Daraa's Health Directorate but civilians are also threatened with arrest when trying to access the National Hospital in the city. In Daraa al-Moukhayam, Daraa's Water Establishment refused to find a solution to the drinking water sanitation problem and the issue of improper sewage disposal. The pretext for this failure to act was financial deficit, but as one city resident explained, "we have been told there is no money to fix the water network ... if the delivery of clean drinking water is not at the top of their priorities, then what is?"

The absence of effective governance across Daraa governorate leaves civilians with no other option than to launch collective initiatives by spending their savings on instituting short-term alternatives to complete governance-related duties, such as removing rubble themselves, reconstructing their own homes and repairing local infrastructure (e.g. resurfacing streets and restoring electricity supplies). In Kherbet Ghazaleh, school principals collected money from the local communities to reconstruct schools and in Daraa al-Balad, people put together the monthly salaries of rubbish collection workers. In other localities, such as Da'el and Sayda, the municipality has undertaken reconstruction work on water pipes and electricity cables at the expense of the local population. To obtain funds, civilians often tap into kinship ties and appeal to the diaspora to intervene. On a number of recorded occasions, the diaspora has wired funds to hospitals in Busra al-Sham and al-Jizeh to allow them to purchase medications. In Sayda, the diaspora contributed to restoring the electricity supply in the town by buying cables and paying the workers.

Faced with the threat of the spread of Covid-19, the lack of trust in government institutions has led people in Daraa to form committees to patrol the streets and spread awareness of precautionary measures. A few pharmacists have begun distributing packages containing face masks, gloves and hand sanitisers free of charge. In some other areas, such as al-Kark town, the locals have taken independent decisions to enforce curfews, prevent gatherings (including weddings and funerals), run patrols to prevent increases in the prices of essential goods and provide help for the elders of the town. In Busra al-Sham and Um Walad, doctors and volunteers have come together to form committees to examine patients in their homes. These preventative measures are crucial because, as one Daraa local stated, "[w]e should expect a day when the government would openly declare its inability to face the spread of the virus ... that's why we should rely on ourselves from now on and take the precautionary measures."

Such local initiatives rely heavily on networks of solidarity and collective responsibility. However, while some civilians have the option of obtaining financial assistance from relatives or through access

to the diaspora, many other people have had to dip into their savings or sell their belongings as alternative solutions to contribute to the initiative and avoid the shame of non-participation. In the succinct words of one western Daraa local, “[t]his is not a life anymore ... fridges, carpets, TVs and in some cases a proper bedroom become part of a luxury lifestyle ... many people had to sell their belongings to participate in fixing electricity and water pipes and cover the failure of the government.”

This rising discontent combined with the Russian guarantor acting as a bystander has sown the seeds for violence. Unemployment, poverty, the failure of economic development and discriminatory service delivery are drivers of conflict and can also shape individuals’ preferences for engaging in new forms of violence. This clear summary of the situation was given to me by a Daraa native in the diaspora: “no one should speak of peace and reconciliation if they can’t enforce a settlement ... armed attacks are the normal result of the regime’s reluctance to fulfil its promises ... many people have nothing to lose, they opted for weapons again.”

The case of local governance in Daraa is not a typical story of post-conflict failure to perform service delivery, but instead represents an example of how a ‘fierce state’ prioritises security over development criteria.¹¹ Beyond state fragility and the weakness-based model, post-rebellion local governance and the meeting of civilian needs in the post-reconciliation epoch in Syria fall into the category of ‘low politics.’ Therefore, any analysis that portrays ‘poor governance’ as the main challenge in post-rebellion contexts and recommends that international aid support small-scale rehabilitation projects “to test an incremental incentives-based approach (...) in exchange for political reforms and regime steps to ease repressive and discriminatory practices,”¹² reflects a narrow understanding of the specific structure and functioning of the Syrian regime.

3. The ‘Security First’ Mindset of the Syrian Regime

Nearly two years have passed since the Russian-brokered agreement was concluded, and the Syrian regime continues to overlook the obligations it undertook in relation to releasing detainees and guaranteeing the security and safety of reconciled military deserters, defectors, draft evaders and former rebels. In many respects, the situations that this agreement was supposed to have resolved have in fact deteriorated. The regime has indeed used the detainee issue and rebel military integration (RMI)¹³ as tools to tightly control territory, subjugate the population, enforce obedience and retaliate against those who once challenged its rule.

3.1. Detainees and Weapon Control

As in other areas of Syria, the issue of detainees remains a serious concern in Daraa, and the resolution of the situation is a top priority for the region’s people. During the July 2018 negotiations, the Russian delegation declined to push for the release of any detainee captured up to three months prior to the start of the military campaign (which is to say before March 2018), claiming that the issue of prisoners and detainees was a question for the Astana negotiations and not for local agreements. Furthermore, the Syrian regime has reneged on its promise to release all detainees in Daraa. In a

¹¹ According to Steven Heydemann, a “fierce state” is “one in which ruling elites elevate survival above all else and design institutions to support this aim.” Steven Heydemann, “Beyond Fragility: Syria and the Challenges of Reconstruction in Fierce States,” *The New Geopolitics* (Washington, DC: Brookings, June 2018), 2, <https://brook.gs/33acoCD>.

¹² For example, see International Crisis Group: “Ways out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum,” Middle East Report (Brussels: Crisis Group, 25 November 2019), <http://bit.ly/3d0T14L>.

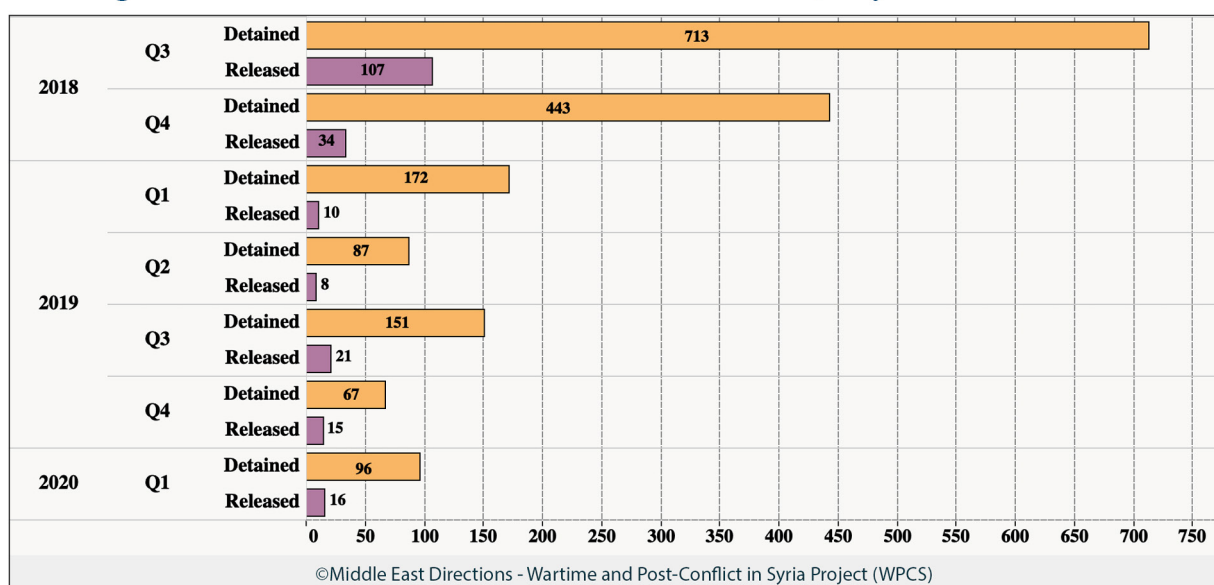
¹³ Rebel Military Integration is understood as the process or remobilising and merging defeated rebels into the government army. See Paul Collier et al., “Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy,” A World Bank Policy Research Report (Oxford: A Co-publication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003).

civilian meeting in Da’el town in late June 2019, Major General Jamil al-Hasan, former head of Air Force Intelligence, reportedly told people to forget about those detained before 2014.¹⁴ However, according to the ‘Horan Free League,’ 312 documented detainees were released between July 2018 and March 2020, 265 of whom were detained after the conclusion of Daraa’s surrender agreement in July 2018.¹⁵

Given the importance of the matter to the local population, the release of detainees has become a tactic and bargaining chip used by the Syrian regime to enforce weapons control. Following his appointment as head of the General Security Directorate in July 2019, with which he took on the responsibility of managing the security situation in Syria’s south, General Hussam Luqa has used the detainees’ case as leverage to enforce reconciliation and engender surrender. In several meetings with the CNC and the local population in areas like Daraa al-Balad and Nahta village, Luqa has unsuccessfully demanded the surrender of light weapons as a pre-condition for the release of detainees.

The case of detainees has been further aggravated by rampant arrests and detentions conducted by the SAA and the state’s security apparatuses. Following the conclusion of the agreement in July 2018, checkpoints staffed by the different state security apparatuses and the SAA were immediately put back in place to detain both reconciled civilians and former rebels (Figure 7). Reconciled military defectors, whether they turned themselves in or were arrested at a checkpoint, were not immune to detention. Between July 2018 and mid-March 2020, and in spite of the issuance of legislative decrees No.18 and No.20 which grant a general amnesty for military deserters,¹⁶ 140 military defectors were reportedly arrested across Daraa, according to statistics obtained from the ‘Horan Free League.’ A few of these detainees have subsequently been released and joined the SAA, while a small number are reported to have died in prison.

Figure 7. Number of Documented Detainees in Daraa, July 2018 - March 2020



Source: The author (Data obtained from ‘Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office’)

¹⁴ Khalid Al-Zu’bi, “What is the Revenge of Jamil Al-Hassan in Daraa?” (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, November 11, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2X7UFfh>.

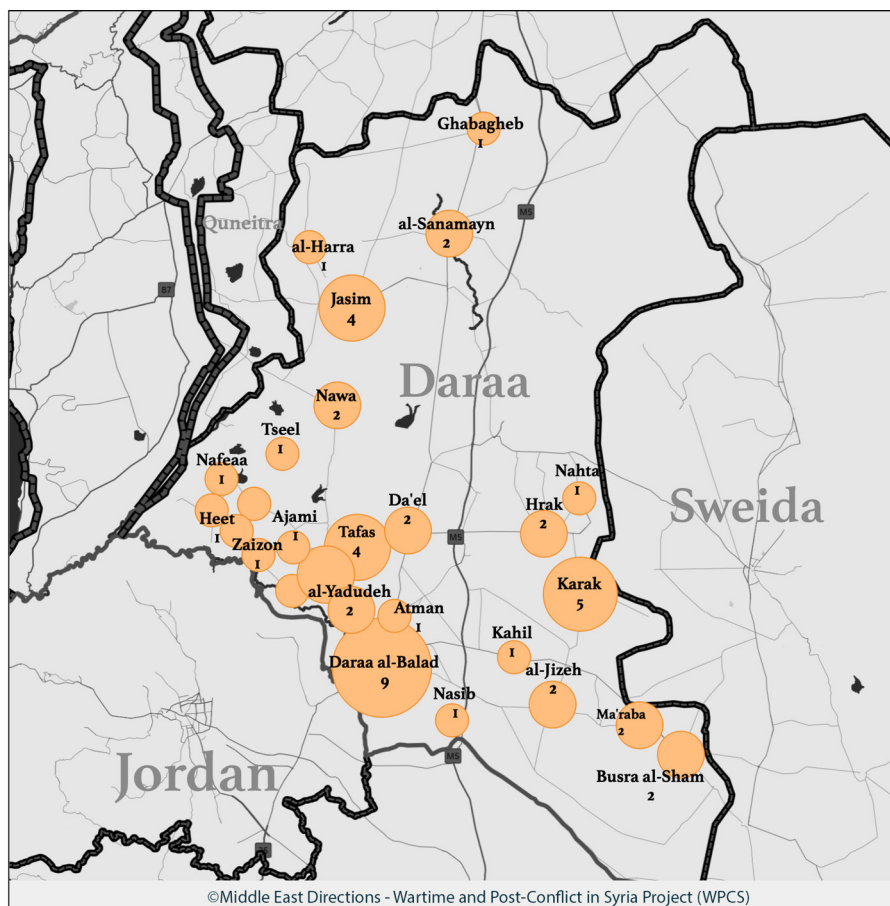
¹⁵ ‘Horan Free League’ acknowledges difficulties in documenting all cases of detentions and releases. Therefore, the actual numbers of instances of detentions and releases are always greater than those of the documented cases.

¹⁶ Decrees No.18 and No.20 were issued by President Bashar al-Assad in October 2018 and September 2019 respectively. SANA, “President al-Assad Issues a Legislative Decree Granting a General Amnesty for Crimes Committed Before 14 September 2019,” *SANA* (blog), accessed September 15, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dtGvLf>; SANA, “President al-Assad Issues a Legislative Decree Granting a General Amnesty for the Full Punishment of Internal and External Desertion Crimes Committed Before 9 October 2018,” *SANA* (blog), accessed 10 October 2018, <http://bit.ly/39Rbu1o>.

While the Syrian regime’s deep-rooted security-focused mentality has survived the war seemingly unscathed, Daraa’s population’s experience of ten years of war – living under different control mechanisms, interacting with non-state armed actors and, in some cases, enacting resistance against heavily armed rebels – has dispelled some previously held certainties and helped to shape new behaviours. This, in turn, complicates the conflict-pacification process and creates a space for fuelling resentment and violence against the regime’s attempts to implement and reproduce its domination.

On many occasions since the end of the rebellion, civilians have gone back to the streets to demand the release of detainees. Between July 2018 and March 2020, more than 60 protests took place in several localities in Daraa to request the release of detainees and demand an end to security measures implemented against the civilian population (Map 4). To prevent arrests, locals even took up arms and raided checkpoints to enforce their own arbitrary detentions. In response to the detention of a man from a village at another checkpoint near al-Museifra town in January 2020, a group of locals attacked an Air Force Intelligence checkpoint near Nahta village, capturing 15 members of its staff and seizing their weapons. In February 2020, unknown gunmen attacked an Air Force Intelligence checkpoint between al-Jizeh and al-Museifra to protest against the arrest of one civilian and the harassment of several others at a checkpoint. In Jasim, explosive belts were used to deter arrests, whereas in October 2019 a man actually detonated an explosive belt, causing his own death and those of two patrol members, when a patrol affiliated with the State Security apparatus raided his home.

Map 4. Reported Protests in Daraa, July 2018 - March 2020



Source: The author (Data obtained from ‘Horan Free League’)

3.2. Manipulated Rebel Integration

With the conditions for ‘reconciliation’ in place, many former rebels envisaged joining the state forces as a way to avoid punishment, a door which the Syrian regime has left open. But beneath the

implementation of rebel integration lies another cause of post-rebellion violence in Daraa. First, the process of rebel integration in areas regained militarily by the Syrian regime occurs outside of the state structure, beyond its control and through diffuse non-centralised security apparatuses which compete to reconcile, recruit and remobilise former rebels. The process does not aim for compulsory disarming or dissolution of the defeated rebel groups but instead relies on financial incentives and coercive mechanisms to shift loyalties.¹⁷

Second, the process of rebel integration exploits the tribal attributes of Daraa's society to trigger a series of local conflicts. By incorporating specific figures in the security and military forces, the Syrian regime carefully pitted reconciled rebels against unreconciled rebels and then unleashed these antagonistic forces against the civilian population and opposition activists they had once lived amongst and cooperated with (Figure 8). When the first instance of violence occurred, honour, revenge and kinship caused a tribal fault line to emerge and a subsequent series of retaliatory assassinations contributed to deterioration of the security situation.

Figure 8. Prominent Former Rebels and their Roles in Post-rebellion Daraa



Source: The author

How might this chaos help the Syrian regime to consolidate control? The presence in the region of a high number of former rebels who refused to relocate to Idlib, the abundance of light weapons and restrictions on the state's complete and absolute access to particular localities are three key dilemmas that the Syrian regime faces in Daraa governorate. As it appears unwilling to tolerate any 'rebellious spheres' and is furthermore determined to regain control and strengthen its grip over the entire governorate, the regime's manipulation of rebel integration has created the requisite conditions

¹⁷ Al-Jabassni, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria."

for a temporary chaotic hostile and violent environment to develop, which can be used as a pretext for the state to play its role as arbiter of local conflicts through a military offensive, ultimately regaining absolute control and a firm grip on security.

The case of Mustafa al-Masalmeh, (locally known as al-Kasim), a former leader of the Katibat Ahfad Khalid bin al-Walid rebel group and a descendant of the well-known al-Masalmeh clan, offers a clear illustration of how the aforementioned situation is created. Following the rebel surrender in July 2018, al-Kasim reconciled his status with the Syrian regime and was immediately conscripted to lead an armed group affiliated with the Military Security Branch in Daraa city. Al-Kasim guided the Military Security Branch to a substantial weapons cache that had been in the possession of former rebel organisations in Daraa city. This, however, was not deemed to demonstrate a genuine shift in his loyalty. In return for financial incentives and security privileges which allowed him to return to his original occupation as a cigarette smuggler, al-Kasim was also required to track down unreconciled rebels and civilians he had once collaborated with and led in the Daraa al-Balad area of Daraa city. The goal behind a strategy of this kind is to disrupt clan and family ties, provoke tensions and provide motivations for retaliations even between clan members.

As soon as al-Kasim began provoking, arresting and imprisoning unreconciled rebels and civilians in Daraa al-Balad, he became the target of relentless assassination attempts. He had already survived several attacks himself when his brother, Wissam, who was also a reconciled former rebel and a member of the Military Security Branch, was killed in an IED attack in Daraa city in late December 2019, which triggered retaliation cycles and increased violence in the city. By way of response to his brother's murder, al-Kasim's group kidnapped and executed three individuals from Daraa al-Balad and placed their dead bodies in the exact same location where Wisam's body had been discovered.

Al-Kasim's situation is by no means unique in Daraa. Emad Abu Zureq and Mahmoud Murshid al-Baradan are both former rebels whose careers fit a similar pattern: while the former leads a group affiliated with the Military Security Branch near Nasib border crossing with Jordan, the latter became a member of the CNC with robust ties to the 4th Division near Tafas. Available data on political violence in areas where similar figures are active reveal high numbers of kidnappings and killings in comparison to other areas in Daraa governorate.

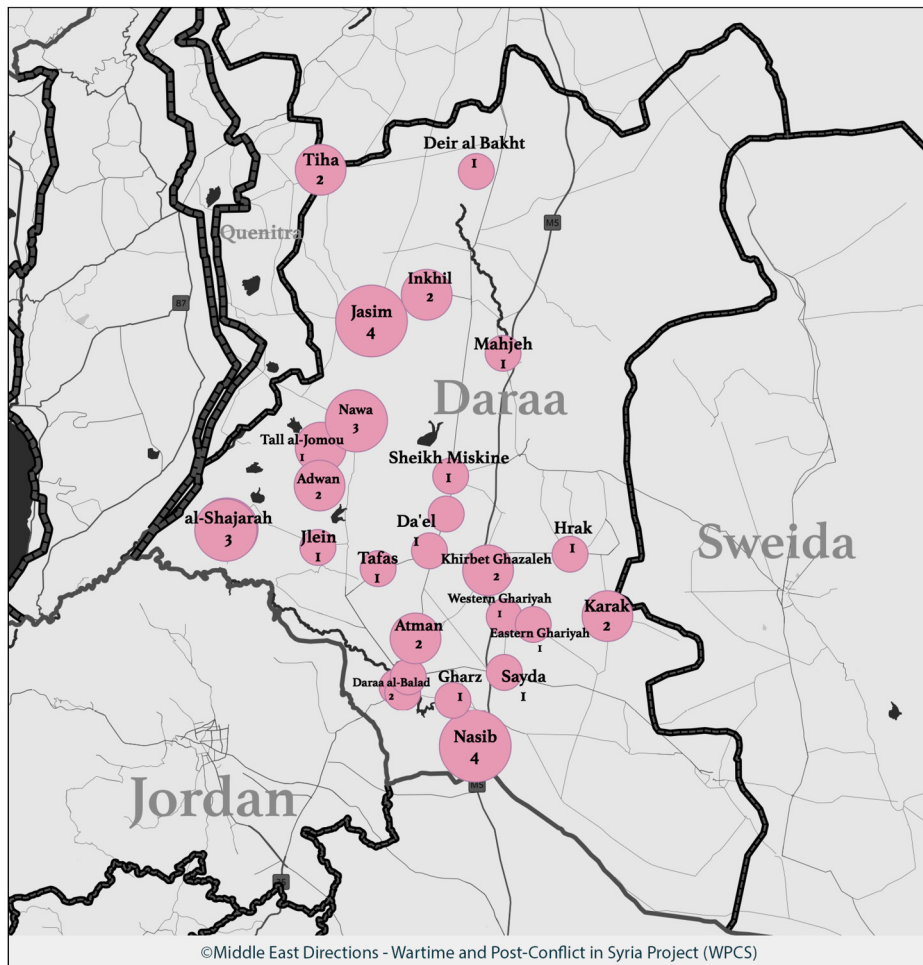
The recent case of al-Sanamayn city offers a good example of how the Syrian regime manipulates rebel integration and creates hostilities which allow the state to intervene and reclaim full control. The city was the first in Daraa to engage in reconciliation with the Syrian regime back in December 2016 in order to end the regime's siege of the city. At that time, armed rebels from prominent clans, such as al-Thiab and al-Etma, rejected the reconciliation process and congregated in one of the city's neighbourhoods, while more than 500 individuals, including 180 rebels, engaged in the reconciliation and surrendered their weapons. Amongst those who surrendered was Thair al-Fallah (aka Thair al-Abbas), the former rebel leader of Liwa Ummat al-Tawhid and a descendent of the prominent al-Fallah clan of al-Sanamayn city. Al-Fallah was approached by the Military Security Branch to lead an affiliated armed group in the city, and so quickly began to provoke the remaining unreconciled rebels either by detaining their relatives at checkpoints or by confronting them directly.

This division created a situation of total lawlessness. Retaliatory assassinations, kidnappings and clashes between the city's sons who had joined the Military Security Branch and those who remained unreconciled rebels became a daily occurrence until the deterioration of absolute security prompted state intervention. On 28 February 2020, the Syrian regime launched a military offensive to eliminate the remaining enclaves of armed resistance and regain absolute control over the city. This military campaign, which led to the killing of the unreconciled rebel leader Walid Zahra, ended on 1 March 2020 with an intervention by al-Oda, who brokered a deal which led 21 rebels to be exiled to northern Syria and a further 80 to reconcile their status with the Syrian regime.

It is important to note that other areas with similar configurations to al-Sanamayn are not immune to this scenario. Unless Russia decides to accord them full protection and incorporate them in the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps, it will probably only be a matter of time before Tafas, Jasim, Daraa al-Balad and other localities where unreconciled rebels are grouping face a second round of negotiations under SAA fire, as in the case of al-Sanamayn.

Finally, the presence of IS sleeper cells in Daraa attests to the improper treatment of former IS fighters. Without implementing adequate security or monitoring measures, the Syrian regime released more than 60 former rebels of *Jayish Khalid bin al-Walid* (JKBW), an IS-affiliated group which was defeated in Daraa, shortly after they were arrested in August 2018. While many of them were released in order to assist the SAA in de-mining areas which JKBW had previously planted with explosives (causing frequent casualties, Map 5), many others immediately returned to their home localities, which caused fear and insecurity among the civilian population, which was entirely opposed to the presence of this notorious group in Daraa. Unsurprisingly, their release left the south vulnerable to the resurgence of attacks. Between September and December 2019 alone, IS claimed responsibility for 26 attacks in Daraa which targeted civilians, the SAA, state security forces and the Russian Military Police. From the Syrian regime’s perspective, the resurgence of IS offers another valid justification for declaring military and security measures at any time to “raid and subjugate Daraa’s western region under the banner of combating terrorism,” in the words of a resident of Yarmouk Basin in western Daraa.

Map 5. Casualties from Landmines and Explosive Remnants of War in Daraa, July 2018 - March 2020



Source: The author

4. Disputes Over the Presence of Iran and Hezbollah

Shortly after the rebel surrender in July 2018, Iranian-backed militias swept into Daraa governorate and widened the geographical scope of their involvement to utilise the governorate's geostrategic location as a potential frontline against Israel. To avoid Israeli strikes and to be able to move freely, Iranian-backed militias, including Hezbollah, benefited from the cover provided by allied groups, the 4th Division and the Air Force Intelligence, and focused their efforts on building a parallel armed force not operating under the control of the Syrian regime. Although the arrival of Hezbollah and Iranian groups in Daraa was simple enough, two main factors challenge their plans for establishing a long-term presence: Russia's concurrent plans and recruitment strategies, and the growing hostility of the local population.

Although direct confrontation between Russia and Iran in Syria is improbable and competition for influence and control amongst their protégés does not necessarily reflect a disagreement between the regime's two main allies, Russia remains a main recruitment rival in Daraa. The most recent estimate in March 2020 suggests that Hezbollah has been able to draw only around 300 of Daraa's former rebels into its ranks through the tempting offer of a 200-500 USD monthly income, exemption from military service, protection from arrest and a security badge that removes all restrictions on individuals' movements.¹⁸ In comparison, nearly 1,600 recruits (including more than 900 former rebels) from the eastern region of Daraa joined the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps after being swayed by the notion of genuine Russian protection.

The ambitions of Iran and Hezbollah in Daraa have also been met with growing civilian resistance manifested in increasingly frequent protests and graffiti across the governorate. While Hezbollah has been able to attract many former rebels and civilians into its ranks, the strong rejection of its presence and activities in Daraa is, however, significant. This hostility stems from Hezbollah's intervention in Syria to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime. This operation ultimately put the group in a stand-off against many local Daraa communities which resulted in an important number of civilian casualties. Furthermore, with the defeat of the rebellion and the expansion of state-allied armed forces, Daraa's people feared that Hezbollah would take the spread of Shiism as a means with which to embed itself in the social fabric of the governorate and achieve a long-term presence there.

In addition, as Hezbollah supported the Syrian regime in its military operations in Daraa during the rebellion, many recruits who joined the 8th Brigade have not forgotten their previous grievances against Iran and Hezbollah and still harbour enmity toward them. In the words of an interviewee from eastern Daraa, "[w]e do not forget history ... Hezbollah supported the Syrian regime in killing the people of Daraa and the people of Busra al-Sham in 2015."

The weaponisation of Busra al-Sham town – the main Shia hub in Daraa, which is now controlled by the 8th Brigade – and Hezbollah's recruitment of its youth in 2014 and 2015 have allegedly eroded the historically strong ties between the Sunni clans and Shia families, generating divisions and suspicions amongst them. Furthermore, the town's Shia population, which was displaced in March 2015 when local rebel groups ousted Hezbollah and the SAA forces from the town, have not yet been allowed to return to their homes. At the time of writing, the Sunni clans supported by al-Oda have rejected the possibility of the Shia population returning to the town out of concern that their links with Hezbollah will lead to increased violence and so as to prevent Hezbollah and Iran from infiltrating and controlling

¹⁸ Hezbollah, for example, incorporated former Alwyat al-Omari rebels into a group led by Fadi Subeh that operates in the al-Lajat area, and a second led by Ra'ef al-Zu'bi that operates in al-Mseifra. Ex-rebels from Jayish Ahara al-'Ashair merged into a group led by Mansour al-Rwedan that operates in Mseka, and ex-rebels from Amoud Hauran incorporated into a group led by Mish'al al-Kasabrah in al-Hrak, and another led by Samir al-Hariri in Bisir al-Harir. Some reports estimate the number of former rebels recruited by Hezbollah at between 1,500 and 2,500, which seems exaggerated. The total number of Hezbollah militants in Daraa, including non-Syrian members, does not exceed 1,200.

the town.¹⁹ “The return of the Shia families will provide Hezbollah with an additional town to control. We actually prefer Russia,” said one interviewee from the town.

As a result, civil resistance against Hezbollah and Iran has manifested itself in a number of pieces of graffiti across Daraa and been voiced through protests. In the months of November and December 2019, for example, at least 15 protests took place in localities, including Ma’raba, Karak, Heet, Nasib, al-Shajarah, Sahem al-Golan, Zaizon and al-Ajami, in which protestors demanded the expulsion of Hezbollah and Iran from Daraa. To counter this emerging civil resistance which could disrupt its presence, Hezbollah has allegedly recruited several informers – such as Husam Fnikher, the former rebel leader of the ‘Syrian Revolutionaries Front’ organisation – to monitor the population and identify local activists and former rebel leaders who oppose the presence of Iranian-backed forces in southern Syria. Consequently, numerous former unreconciled rebels, reconciled rebels and influential civilians who openly criticise or object to this presence have allegedly been made targets of violence.

For instance, Mamoun al-Hariri, a well-known and well-respected doctor from Bisir al-Harir town who refused to be displaced in 2018 and publicly warned of the dangers of Iran and Hezbollah’s presence in Daraa, was killed by an IED that targeted him on 19 January 2020. “I am sure that Hezbollah killed him because he [al-Hariri] was very influential not only in Bisir al-Harir but in the entire eastern region of Daraa ... his five sons were killed by Assad regime airstrikes, [but he] never gave up, decided to stay in his home when the regime returned in 2018, and always encouraged people to resist the presence of foreign elements in Daraa,” an interviewee who knew Dr. al-Hariri explained.

In addition to civilians, unreconciled rebel leaders who openly resist the presence of Hezbollah and Iran in Daraa have become targets as well. Adham al-Akrad, who is currently sheltering in the Daraa al-Balad area of Daraa city, has previously labelled Hezbollah as “inferior” and promised a response to the militia’s “excesses” in Daraa in posts on his Facebook page. He survived an assassination attempt in September 2019, after which his condemnation of Hezbollah intensified and included a warning to “Syrian youth not to fall into the trap of this treacherous party.” Former rebels who reconciled their status and joined the state forces are vulnerable to retribution when signalling defiance of Iran or Hezbollah. Mohammed Nour Zeid al-Bardan, a former rebel who joined the Military Security Branch and openly rejected Hezbollah’s extension of its control in the western region of Daraa, was shot and killed in front of his home in Tafas town in late April 2019. “Hezbollah is determined to eliminate any source of potential resistance to its presence in Daraa, its fighters are targeting former activists and former opposition fighters who did not reconcile with the regime and show signs of rejection of Iran or Hezbollah ... this is *Hauran*, the people of the land have their own ways to end the Iranian plan for the south, and they are the ones who will have the final word,” asserted a displaced former rebel leader.

This violence has triggered the perpetration of revenge attacks against collaborators with and leaders of Iranian-affiliated groups. For instance, Ali al-Zaher, an Iraqi Hezbollah commander, survived a drive-by shooting on 2 April 2019 in Bisir al-Harir town; Ahmad al-Nakhlawi, a local recruiter for Hezbollah in Tafas, was shot and killed by unidentified armed men in the town on 11 December 2019; and Hassan al-Abdullah, the head of al-Shajarah Municipality and a collaborator with Hezbollah and Iranian backed groups, survived an IED attack on 19 August 2019, and a second attempted assassination on 1 September 2019, before he was killed in a drive-by shooting on 10 December 2019. “This growing whirlpool of violence will not end until Hezbollah and Iran leave Daraa ... their battle against the sons of the land will not be easy and will negatively influence their capacity to battle the Zionists,” noted one pro-Hezbollah civilian.

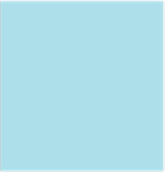
¹⁹ Al-Jabassini, “Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria,” 7.

Conclusion

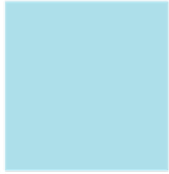
The situation in Daraa contradicts the ‘return of the state’ ideal narrative and offers an illustration of how territorial and security fragmentation in post-reconciliation may look. Daraa exhibits a unique post-‘reconciliation’ pattern in which several political orders have emerged, providing very disparate systems of service provision and security climates. Areas that engaged in Russian-led negotiation and obtained full Russian protection appear to have comparatively good service delivery systems and security conditions, which suggests the superiority of Russia’s governance over the Syrian state’s in the south of the country.

The Syrian regime will continue manoeuvring to achieve unlimited and unrestricted access to its territory in Daraa. Therefore, unless Russia accords full protection to localities which currently only benefit from limited protection and integrates their former rebels into the 8th Brigade, the Syrian regime is more than likely to keep increasing its pressure on these localities, for two crucial reasons: first, to consolidate control, enforce weapon control and provide a secure environment for INGOs to conduct governance-related projects; and second, to incorporate remaining unreconciled rebels and draft evaders into the SAA and state security apparatuses in order to engage them in battles elsewhere in Syria.

However, Daraa will continue to pose a challenge to the full return of the Syrian regime for as long as people’s grievances remain unresolved. As illustrated, peoples’ festering grievances are the main reason for increasing insecurity in Daraa. Nearly two years since the conclusion of the surrender deal, most of the promises it entailed have at best been partially fulfilled if not entirely overlooked. The expansion of Hezbollah and Iran in Daraa has not stopped (triggering more violence and new local conflicts), detainees have not been released and instances of new arrests are met with quid pro quo detentions and attacks, the vast majority of dismissed employees have not been allowed to return to their government jobs (leading to growing poverty) and service provision remains poor and has been instrumentalised in a number of localities to punish local communities. For many, feeling betrayed provides a motive for resuming protests and may cause a relapse into armed resistance.



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