Post-Reconciliation
Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?

Mazen Ezzi
Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?

Mazen Ezzi
# Table of Contents

**Executive Summary**  
1

**Introduction**  
2

1. **Drivers of Change and Continuity**  
3

2. **New Figures Imposed from Above**  
6  
2.1. Zabadani: Total Displacement  
6  
2.2. Douma: The Giant Prison  
8

3. **Local Actors in the Reconciliation Committees Marginalised**  
11  
3.1. Qudsaya and al-Hameh: Reconciliation Assassinated  
12  
3.2. Yalda and Southern Damascus: Conflicting Committees  
14

4. **The Role of Community Networks**  
17  
4.1. Al-Tall: The Neutral Opposition  
17  
4.2. Moadhamiyat al-Sham: Partnering with the Fourth Division  
19

**Conclusion**  
22
Executive Summary

Two years on from the Syrian regime’s military recapture of the entirety of Rural Damascus, the fates of influential local actors, including communal dignitaries, religious clerics, businessmen, civil society activists and military commanders, appear to vary from area to area depending on a range of factors. Analysis of these ramifications reveals three broadly distinct categories. In areas that were subject to intense warfare ending in the forced displacement of most of the population backed by powerful foreign intervention, local communities have undergone severe trauma with their social fabric torn apart and their most prominent social actors lost. In areas that only witnessed partial displacement and limited external intervention, two categories can be identified: in areas where Sufi clerics took the lead during reconciliation processes, these influential actors maintained a presence afterwards, albeit with roles that steadily diminished over time; in areas where strong social and family networks were of great significance, some local community figures were able to retain their previous roles in the post-reconciliation phase.
Introduction

‘Reconciliation’ agreements between the Syrian government and opposition entities led to the Syrian regime regaining military and security control over the whole of Rural Damascus between 2016 and 2018.¹ Several of the areas that underwent such reconciliations in Rural Damascus were broadly similar, both in terms of their social characteristics, living standards, religious demographics and political orientations prior to 2011 and in terms of their war, siege and displacement trajectories after 2011. These similarities, however, did not always translate into the same trajectories in the post-reconciliation phase.

A number of studies have described the roles played by various local social actors during the war, focusing on intermediaries between the regime and local communities² or the extent to which such mediation has been effective in the post-reconciliation phase.³ This paper, however, presents a comparative study of six areas in Rural Damascus – Zabadani, Douma, Yalda, Qudsaya, al-Tall and Moadhamiyat al-Sham – examining how they have fared two years on from the conclusion of the reconciliation processes. It aims to explain both changes and continuity in the local social actors and their roles,⁴ particularly of those who participated in the reconciliations and were not afterwards displaced from their local communities.

This research paper first presents a conceptual framework based on empirical data collected from the six selected areas and explains the factors considered in the allocation of these case studies into three distinct categories. Next, the paper details the three categories. The first comprises Zabadani and Douma, where prominent social actors were almost entirely absent following reconciliation. The second covers Yalda and Qudsaya, where certain social actors maintained a presence after reconciliation albeit with roles that steadily diminished over time. Last, the third category comprises al-Tall and Moadhamiyat al-Sham, where some local community figures were able to remain and preserve roles for themselves in the post-reconciliation phase.

The bulk of the evidence on which this study draws was collected through 48 interviews conducted by the author between June and August 2020 with activists, researchers, members of reconciliation committees and local councils, military actors involved in negotiation processes and former local officials. The author also collated and analysed a large number of relevant media articles, verifying the information they contained by corroborating it with online open source materials and with his personal research archive. He made use of all the available relevant literature in order to set out the general research framework and formulate its central questions. Unless stated otherwise, the data presented in this paper are taken from the interviews. Given the current situation in Rural Damascus, and in order to ensure the safety of all the interviewees, many names and other forms of personal information have been withheld.

¹ These local agreements were used by the regime to regain control of opposition areas, using military and political pressure to force their opponents to surrender. For more, see: Fadi Adleh and Agnès Favier, “‘Local reconciliation agreements’ in Syria: A Non- Starter for Peacebuilding,” Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute: Middle East Directions, June 2017), https://bit.ly/2HqzE4P
⁴ The paper uses the terms ‘local social actors’ and ‘local community figures’ to refer to dignitaries, clerics, businessmen, civil activists and military commanders in a given area who have become influential after assuming a leadership role in their communities. Their social status may take two forms: that inherited by traditional dignitaries and family leaders; or that acquired through securing a position or leadership role.
1. **Drivers of Change and Continuity**

Based on a series of preliminary interviews conducted with many local civilian and military actors involved in the negotiation and reconciliation processes in the six localities, four key factors driving changes and continuities in post-reconciliation local community figures can be identified.

The first of these is intervention by foreign powers in the processes of negotiation and reconciliation, and the continued presence of these powers on the ground subsequent to the reconciliation. In the case of Rural Damascus, these foreign powers are Russia and Iran, together with the latter’s Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. These interventions and ground presences tended to take one of two forms. The first was decisive intervention in which the foreign power directly took part in hostilities, played a fundamental role in negotiating the reconciliation agreement and maintained a permanent post-reconciliation military presence in the area (as in Zabadani). The second was a more limited intervention, in which the foreign power engaged in some or all of the fighting and negotiations and/or acted as a guarantor for the regime under the terms of the reconciliation agreement while nonetheless declining to maintain a continual military presence following reconciliation (as in Yalda).

The second key factor is the degree to which the local population underwent forced displacement. The greater the extent of displacement, the greater was the disruption to or alteration of the social structure and the networks of local community figures in the area. Two distinct types of displacement may be identified. The first is indiscriminate displacement of large numbers of residents, with part of the population allowed to return after obtaining the necessary security approval. The second is partial displacement of a specific minority of the population, often targeting prominent figures and activists from the period of armed opposition control.

The third factor is the composition of the reconciliation committees and the strength of their ties with the local communities they were supposed to represent. These reconciliation committees were often formed under pressure from the regime, with representatives selected from local families rather than the opposition per se. Accordingly, representation was based on the prevailing bonds in each local community. Four types of such bonds appear to have been decisive. First, a religious bond and more particularly a Sufi one contributed to the selection of a large number of Sufi clerics as representatives of committees, as in the case of Qudsaya. Second, kinship led to the emergence of local actors who often benefited from blood ties binding them to the local population to exert political and military influence during the war and to represent their communities in reconciliation committees (al-Tall being an example). Third, personal friendship or acquaintance between members of the reconciliation committees and influential officers within the regime forces may have played a role in the composition of such committees (as in Moadhamiyat al-Sham). Finally, esprit de corps binding members of one armed group who abandoned the opposition cause to take up arms for the regime while maintaining the inner cohesion of the group can also be found in the example of Moadhamiyat al-Sham.

---


6 Security approval follows a background check conducted by the security services on someone who has requested to return. In the event that approval is obtained, the returnee is required to accept a so-called ‘settlement’ with the security services in which they provide information about their activities during the period of opposition control and agree to join the military within a six-month window if they are of the age of compulsory or reserve army service.

7 A 2018 study suggests there were two types of reconciliation – soft and hard – based on two factors: the extent of political, economic and military conflict in the pre-reconciliation community and the degree of displacement imposed on the community in order to achieve the reconciliation agreement. For more, see Humanitarian Access Team, “Reconciliation and Remobilisation: The Reintegration of Armed Opposition Combatants in Post-Reconciled Communities,” May 2018, Restricted access.
The fourth factor determining changes and continuities in the post-reconciliation era is the regime’s top-down approach to restructuring local authorities and state institutions. While the regime sometimes preferred to accommodate parts of the opposition and civil society in certain ‘representative’ institutions such as municipal councils, the local actors who were in positions of authority during the time of opposition control were generally excluded. The most important appointments of new local authorities occurred during the local administration elections of September 2018, then during the elections for the local Baath Party leaderships at the end of 2019 and the start of 2020 and lastly during the People’s Council elections in July 2020. These electoral processes were not transparent with often only one list of candidates selected by the central power and elected by acclamation. Accordingly, the elections rewarded those who maintained loyalty to the regime during the years of conflict.

On the basis of these four factors (Figure 1), the fates of local social actors after reconciliation in the towns of Rural Damascus may be classified into the following three broad categories.

Category A: Areas in which all prominent social actors during the time of opposition control were expelled and an altogether new class of figures were installed along with reorganisation of local authority structures. This category contains the towns of Zabadani and Douma, where most or all of the population underwent forced displacement amid decisive foreign intervention in the course of military battles, negotiations and reconciliation.

8 “Top-down” refers to the appointments to executive or representative positions in state institutions by a decision taken outside the local community.
10 The comprehensive elections for all Party branches to determine the heads of companies, divisions and branches between October 2019 and February 2020 were the first of their kind since 2011.
12 Some of these figures are former representatives who left their local areas after 2011.
Category B: Areas in which local community figures who came to prominence during the period of opposition control and then remained in place following reconciliation were steadily marginalised to the point of disappearance. This category covers Qudsaya and Yalda, which saw a partial displacement of residents and more limited, albeit still influential, external intervention. Here, certain figures managed to preserve their status after reconciliation due to their Sufi religious backgrounds, which created beneficial social bonds. Nonetheless, once the security situation in their areas started to stabilise their influence soon began to decline.

Category C: Areas that witnessed relative continuity in the roles of local figures who came to prominence during the time of opposition control and who were not displaced afterwards. This category comprises al-Tall and Moadhamiyat al-Sham, both of which underwent more genuine reconciliation processes and witnessed partial displacement. In this category, local community figures were able to preserve their status after reconciliation owing to social relationships based on kinship and personal acquaintance.

Map 1: Six Case Studies in Rural Damascus

Source: The author.
2. New Figures Imposed from Above

The towns of Douma and Zabadani were subjected to intense military operations followed by a coercive so-called ‘reconciliation’ agreement forced on them by external powers, namely Russia and Iran. To the day of writing, Douma may be considered part of Russia’s sphere of influence and Zabadani part of Lebanese Hezbollah’s. In neither town did the last round of negotiations take place between regime forces and local residents represented by reconciliation committees. Final ‘reconciliation’ agreements were in practice tantamount to surrender deals imposed on locals with nothing given in return. The large-scale displacement of the populations provided the regime, Russia and Hezbollah with an opportunity to install a new network of local actors who were appointed from above as employees in various state institutions. In both towns, absolute power remains in the hands of the security and military forces controlling the ground. This indicates the weakness of civilian institutions and the lack of representation of local communities together with the inability of these communities to overcome the shocks of war and displacement and to generate new social actors of their own.

2.1. Zabadani: Total Displacement

The town of Zabadani is located in the mountainous western Qalamoun region near the Syrian-Lebanese border. It is the centre of an administrative region that includes the towns of Bloudan and Madaya. Prior to 2011, the population of Zabadani was estimated at 30,000, most of whom worked in agriculture, tourism and cross-border smuggling. In January 2012, the regime lost control of Zabadani to a group of opposition factions, most notably Ahrar al-Sham. During that period, civilian opposition activity flourished with an effective local council formed from among the town’s residents. Between 2012 and 2015, the nucleus of a reconciliation committee was created by local activists, dignitaries and clerics. Members of this proto-committee also included a retired army colonel and the head of the town’s Baath Party branch. They communicated with senior officers from the presidential palace, the Fourth Armoured Division and military intelligence to resolve logistical matters, exchange prisoners and bring food into the city.

At the start of 2015, Lebanese Hezbollah tightened its siege on Zabadani, seeking to force the fighters entrenched in the town to surrender. This created a localised famine that displaced most of Zabadani’s civilians to Madaya and Bloudan. Hezbollah’s siege effectively took the town’s fate out of the hands of both local residents and the regime itself. As one regime officer put it to a member of the town’s reconciliation committee when the Hezbollah campaign began, “I no longer have authority. You need to negotiate with the Hezbollah ‘Hajj’ (commander) who is responsible.”

As such, the town became hostage to power struggles between external regional forces, while its local residents lost their seat at the negotiation table. In September 2015, representatives of Ahrar al-Sham and an Iranian delegation formulated in Turkey the first version of what became known as the Four Towns Agreement. Ahrar al-Sham negotiated on Zabadani’s behalf in pursuit of the group’s own interests rather than as a true representative of local residents. The agreement, which subsequently underwent many amendments, together with violations committed by various parties, was partially implemented in November 2015. One year later, with Hezbollah re-tightening the siege on Zabadani, only 200 people remained in the town, most of them fighters. In March 2017, the final version of the agreement was concluded in Doha between Ahrar al-Sham, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah in a deal brokered by the Qatari government. As a result,

---

13 The population size of Zabadani, as in the other areas examined in this paper, is an estimate obtained by the author from former members of opposition local councils and civil society activists.

14 The agreement included Zabadani and Madaya in Rural Damascus and Kefraya and al-Fouaa in the Idlib countryside.
3,500 and 170 fighters fled with their families from Madaya and Zabadani respectively to relocate to northern Syria in exchange for the gradual evacuation of residents from the pro-regime towns of al-Fouaa and Kefraya. Zabadani was thus emptied entirely of its population.

Since February 2018, Zabadani has seen a gradual and extremely limited return of its displaced population from regime-controlled areas elsewhere in Rural Damascus and from Lebanon under the auspices of a local reconciliation committee. The task of this committee is only to collect lists of names of those wishing to return and submit them to the Syrian National Security Bureau, which in turn issues lists of names of those approved for return. No more than 5,000 people have actually returned to the town. Hezbollah continues to prevent many from returning to certain neighbourhoods it has converted into its own security zones in the west of the town. Hezbollah also controls all of the town’s important affairs and intervenes in the decisions as to who is permitted to return. The Fourth Armoured Division, the military intelligence and the National Defence Forces also exert military and security influence over the area.

The total population displacement and then the partial and conditional return of residents enabled the regime to reconfigure the social fabric in the area and to impose a network of loyalists in various state institutions. In September 2018, Bassel Dalati, who is close to the presidential palace, was re-appointed as mayor. Despite these links with the centre of power, the current town council appears almost entirely incapable of providing basic services in the light of the enormous destruction of private property and infrastructure, with an estimated 80 per cent of homes in the town deemed uninhabitable.

In what was seen as an act of revenge against the town, the regime gave greater priority to the wider administrative area of Zabadani than the town itself in the subsequent appointments to Baath Party local leadership positions. The regime in fact favoured personalities from the neighbouring town of Bloudan, which is mostly Christian, since it was the only locality in this administrative region to remain under regime control throughout the duration of the war. In 2018, Radwan Mustafa, a Sunni Muslim from Bloudan, was appointed Secretary of the Rural Damascus branch of the Baath Party – the highest political and executive position in the region after the governor. Although he had been Secretary of the Party’s Zabadani branch between 2003 and 2006, Mustafa is not widely known in the town due to the Party’s historically minimal activity. The selection of MPs in July 2020 followed the same pattern. Radwan Mustafa endorsed the re-election to the Council of his cousin Osama Mustafa, who is also from Bloudan and is head of the Chamber of Commerce in Rural Damascus and Secretary of the Syrian-Chinese Business Council. Two other members from the wider Zabadani region also entered the parliament: Nabil Darwish, a Baathist from the village of Kafr al-Awamid; and Raymond Sabra Hilal, a Christian doctor from Bloudan who is a relative of the former Minister of Internal Trade Atef al-Naddaf.

While thus completely side-lining the town’s representatives, the regime packed the Baath and the People’s Council with representatives from the wider Zabadani area, who numbered three out of the 19 MPs in Rural Damascus. This inflated representation may have been a political tactic to indicate that the regime had no issue with the people of the region in general but only with the town of Zabadani.

---

15 Maj. Gen. Ali Mamlouk still heads the National Security Bureau despite his appointment to Vice-President for Security Affairs and the appointment of a new head of the National Security Bureau. The Bureau is the general coordinator between all the Syrian security services and the president.

16 Dalati’s father was a former political prisoner in the 1980s. Bassel was appointed mayor in 2015 and had undertaken construction projects before leaving Zabadani after 2011.

17 Awad and Favier, op cit.

18 Hilal also works in trading medical materials and supplies. He chairs the board of directors of the Step Association for Artificial Limbs, treating soldiers and other pro-regime personnel wounded in the war.
itself. It may also be partly due to the town’s currently fragile state, and the social fragmentation it has suffered as a result of the war and displacement.\textsuperscript{19} Today, most of Zabadani’s inhabitants are women, children and the elderly. These are people not wanted by the security forces who belong to the poorest social strata, most of whom returned to the devastated city due to a lack of viable alternatives.

Moreover, certain town residents of no prominence prior to 2011 who went on to volunteer for the regime’s forces and security agencies were empowered after reconciliation. Most of these people refrained from joining the opposition after 2011, remaining in regime-controlled areas during the siege. Before the revolution, most worked part-time as informants for the security services alongside their day jobs as labourers or craftsmen. Today, they exploit the considerable powers granted to them in practices tantamount to retaliation against local residents, such as thuggish intimidation, impositions of fees and checkpoints and generally spreading fear. The most powerful person in the town, however, remains Hajj Ali Jawad, a Lebanese Hezbollah member who was involved in the smuggling trade between Syria and Lebanon prior to 2011. Jawad works as an assistant to Hajj Samir, a fellow Hezbollah member living in Bloudan who heads Hezbollah’s western Rural Damascus division. Hezbollah’s Hajjs are often sought out by people as mediators with the regime, usually in exchange for money.\textsuperscript{20}

In consequence, Hezbollah’s tight military and security grip over Zabadani has hindered the process of producing new socially prominent figures from among the few residents Hezbollah has allowed to return. Indeed, all it has accomplished is to allow a group of volunteers in the regime’s forces to impose themselves on the daily rhythm of residents’ lives, while the weak official institutions are unable to improve the town’s services and infrastructure.

2.2.  Douma: The Giant Prison

Douma is the most important town in the Rural Damascus Governorate and the largest in Eastern Ghouta, of which it is the administrative centre. In the last official census taken in 2004, the town’s population numbered 111,000. Regarded as socially conservative and insulated, it has played a pioneering role in agriculture, industry and trade in Rural Damascus. From the 1950s onwards, the town was a stronghold of the Nasserist movement in Syria, although it also took a turn towards Wahhabist Islamism starting in the 1980s with the migration of local workers and professionals to Saudi Arabia.

After several exchanges of control over it between the opposition forces and the regime, Douma finally fell out of the regime’s hands in October 2012. A plethora of opposition military forces took control of the town and subsequently fought among themselves until the Jaysh al-Islam faction seized full control of the town in 2014. Before the regime recaptured the town in April 2018, its population had increased to 200,000 due to its gradual transformation into a destination for internally displaced persons (IDPs) from elsewhere in opposition-held Eastern Ghouta.

As in Zabadani, no reconciliation negotiations took place in Douma. Prior to the final battle in April 2018, Douma was not threatened militarily by the regime\textsuperscript{21} and Jaysh al-Islam’s near-absolute control of the town made it difficult to form a reconciliation committee from within. Outside the town, an ‘external communication committee’ was formed comprising certain dignitaries from Douma who resided in Damascus and were loyal to the regime. In 2016, it negotiated indirectly with Jaysh al-Islam with no significant results.

\textsuperscript{19} More than 600 people from Zabadani were killed during the siege and war.

\textsuperscript{20} The Hajj charges SYP 20 million in return for searching for a detainee in the regime’s prisons.

\textsuperscript{21} The relationship between regime forces and Jaysh al-Islam was governed by a form of mutual deterrence. Over time, Douma became somewhat shielded from military operations on the condition that Jaysh al-Islam left open the road from Damascus to Aleppo on the Harasta side.
In July 2017, Jaysh al-Islam and a Russian delegation signed an agreement brokered by Egypt to include Douma and its surroundings among the ‘de-escalation zones’ agreed on in the Astana diplomatic process. However, regime forces subsequently launched a major military operation in February 2018 with political and military support from Russia and Iran. Direct negotiations later took place between Russian officers and Jaysh al-Islam amid heavy bombardment in Douma, which caused large-scale displacement from the town. At the same time as Russian forces were proposing a ‘reconciliation’ agreement with Jaysh al-Islam whereby those who accepted the settlement would remain and those who refused would be displaced to northern Syria, the regime was invading Eastern Ghouta militarily and approaching Douma.

In early April 2018, under the pressure of military operations and intense bombardment, thousands were displaced from Douma to Syria’s north. They included wounded Jaysh al-Islam members and most of the town’s civilian activists and political dissidents. Nevertheless, Jaysh al-Islam insisted on remaining, even proposing to transform itself into a local civilian police force. Amid these stalled negotiations, on 7 April 2018 Douma was struck with chemical weapons killing dozens of people, most of them women and children. The following day, Jaysh al-Islam agreed to a full evacuation of Douma and to relocate to northern Syria. This final displacement involved 8,000 Jaysh al-Islam fighters and 30,000 civilians. Subsequently, Russian military police entered Douma and the Russian Ministry of Defence declared its control of the town. Around half of the town’s 200,000-strong population remained, under intensifying security control resulting from Russia’s desire to contain the situation following the chemical attacks, which had provoked an unprecedented international reaction culminating in joint US, British and French military strikes on chemical weapon production sites in Syria.

Since April 2018, Douma has been controlled by what is known as the al-Khatib branch of the State Security agency. State Security is deemed to be under Russian influence, with Moscow paying particular attention to the al-Khatib branch. Civilian movement in and out of the town required official approval from the al-Khatib branch up until early 2020. Meanwhile, Russia’s military police, who are mostly Chechen Muslims, pray in the town’s mosques and have attempted to forge relationships with local residents. Over the past two years, State Security has turned Douma into a giant prison. In what often appears to be an act of sheer punishment of the town, its sole road into Damascus is habitually closed for no evident reason. Douma’s State Security branch is the sole entity authorised to approve so-called ‘settlements’ permitting residents to return. Later, it also became responsible for recruiting young men of military service age. On more than one occasion the close partnership between State Security and Russian military police in Douma and the surrounding area has allowed for the expulsion of patrols despatched by Syrian military police and the Fourth Division during the latter’s attempts to set up positions, erect checkpoints or carry out arrests in the town.

After the tightening of Russian security and military control of the town, the top-down process of installing local civil authority structures and state institutions began. The displacement of the majority of local community actors active during the time of opposition control (including members of the local council, civil defence and NGOs) left a substantial gap in the social fabric, not least since Douma was the opposition’s principal centre of gravity in Eastern Ghouta. To fill this vacuum, employees for the civil authorities and state institutions were drawn from among regime loyalists, most of whom resided in Damascus during the period of opposition control in Douma.

---

22 Interview with the Director of Syria Direct, Ammar Hamo, who hails from Douma and resides in Jordan, via WhatsApp, 1 June 2020.

23 Interview with a Syrian researcher specialising in security affairs via Signal, 2 June 2020.

24 Interview with civilian activists in Douma via WhatsApp, 19 June 2020.
Local administration elections took place in September 2018, only five months after the opposition surrendered the town. Following the withdrawal of an ostensible list of independents, the elections became akin to appointments of the Baath-led National Unity list, which won all the seats. The Douma town council was populated with representatives of the community’s most important and prominent large families (e.g. the Taha, Saryul, Shaykh al-Quasyr, Harun, Ma’kekh, Ayoun, Khabiyya, al-Saour, al-Durra and Salam families). As individuals, however, the people chosen were among the least influential members of their families, which rendered them dependent on their security connections more than their family networks. Moreover, most current council members still reside in other regime-controlled areas and only visit Douma during town council meetings. Certain members of the previously established external communication committee also entered the municipal council, such as Mahrous Shughri, a popular singer and local dignitary who was among the founders of the Jaysh al-Wafa (Army of Loyalty) militia that fought for the regime against the opposition in Douma. In addition, a significant proportion of the municipal council members are relatives of influential officials or MPs. For example, Yasser Adas is the son of Rateb Adas, a former Deputy Governor of Rural Damascus and former head of the Douma town council. It appears that Rateb was denied the presidency of the new town council due to Russian pressure owing to his proximity to Iran, having accompanied Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian Supreme Leader’s senior adviser on international affairs, on an official delegation in the town in April 2018.

In the last parliamentary election, Douma was unusually not represented by a candidate on the Baath-led National Unity list for Rural Damascus. Former Baathist MP Muhammad Khayr Saryul, who had been the most prominent member of the external communication committee and had worked to recruit young men into local militias to fight alongside the regime, was side-lined from the National Unity list after he won the Baath Party primaries. Instead, Douma is represented in the 2020 parliament by the businessman Amer Kheit, who ran in the election as an independent. Kheiti hails from a large Douma family and his grandfather was a member of the first Syrian parliament in 1926. Amer Kheit left Douma after 2011, filed for bankruptcy and moved to Lebanon to work with Hezbollah-linked businessmen active in the drug trade, which brought about a reversal of fortunes for him. He assumed the presidency of the Food Supplements Committee in the Syrian-Iranian Business Council and also became chairman of the Vegetable and Fruit Exporters Consortium. In addition to his commercial enterprises, Kheit leads the Development Work Committee in Douma, through which he funded numerous restoration and repair projects for schools and official facilities during his election campaign. The Development Work Committee is officially affiliated with the Douma town council, although in reality it is tied to Kheit personally.

Finally, Douma’s religious clergy was mostly side-lined, even the clerics who had stayed loyal to the regime, such as Sheikh Abd al-Hamid Dalwan, the first cleric to give a Friday sermon in the Douma mosque after the opposition’s withdrawal. By contrast, the regime looked favourably on prominent Douma traders whether they were loyalist or neutral during the period of opposition control. Most notable of these is Ahmad Meri, the local agent of the Syrian Cables Company in Eastern Ghouta, who enjoys a monopoly over trade in electrical equipment in Douma. Similarly, one of the largest iron traders in Syria since before 2011, Abu Mahdi al-Wazir, who remained a regime supporter during the years of conflict, has been allowed to continue operating. Other traders who backed the opposition, however, faced persecution and harassment, such as Abu Rateb Qashou, one of Douma’s leading merchants and a supporter of humanitarian activities during the siege, who was arrested three months after the reconciliation and whose fate remains unknown.

---


26 Aside from independents, Douma often had at least one MP on the Baath Party lists.

27 Author interview with Ammar Hamo.
During the regime’s top-down attempt to fill the social vacuum in Douma, it showed little hesitation to eliminate loyalist officials without justification, including employees in official state institutions and security agencies, irrespective of their seniority. For example, the head of the Douma town council, engineer Nabil Taha, who was elected in 2018, was arrested in December 2019 and publicly beaten and insulted in the Douma district police directorate, in a move reportedly requested by Russia on grounds of a corruption investigation. Neither have such arrests excluded pro-Russian officers: in February 2020, a joint patrol despatched by the Russian military police alongside State Security arrested the head of the Douma Recruitment Division and the head of the local State Security branch, the most powerful security agency in the town.

Unlike in Zabadani, the presence of foreign actors in Douma did not prevent the rebuilding of state institutions, especially the security forces, and placed them under direct foreign control. As a result, the town is heavily subservient to the state and its security services, and behind them Russia. In consequence, there has emerged a class of civil servants relatively proficient at communicating with the local community using the weight of bureaucracy rather than effectiveness at the individual level. This class includes employees in public sector institutions, such as the electricity, finance and education directorates, and members of the town council.

3. Local Actors in the Reconciliation Committees Marginalised

Several years before the final ‘reconciliation’ agreements in 2018, the towns of Qudsaya and Yalda witnessed earlier local truces between 2013 and 2014. In both towns, the local reconciliation committees played key roles in preparing the communities to accept the regime’s return. In contrast to Douma and Zabadani, there was no large-scale displacement of residents, which meant that certain local social forces remained effective. While Russia was only minimally involved in Qudsaya during the negotiation phase, the reconciliation committees in Yalda reached out to both Russia and Iran at various times to strengthen their positions when negotiating with the regime. In both cases such foreign intervention was influential, but the regime had the final say on the reconciliation agreements and what followed them.

After reconciliation, the roles of the most influential local actors quickly declined to the point of disappearance. Notably, Sufi clerics had taken the lead in both towns during both the revolution and reconciliation phases. In this, they were supported directly by the regime’s security agencies in the case of Yalda and by the Rural Damascus clerical establishment in the case of Qudsaya. The regime prized the local Sufi clergy as mediators due to their far-reaching ability to influence the social environment and their adoption of a ‘moderate’ religious discourse that neither defied the regime nor embraced the opposition, being especially unsympathetic to the Salafist currents in it. However, as the security situation stabilised the regime’s need for the clergy diminished. Among the key problems faced by Sufi clerics in these areas appears to be that they supported the revolution when it first began before fundamentally shifting their position and backing the regime after 2014. This was due to the rise of the Salafist current in the opposition’s ranks and the rivalry between Sufism and Salafism for primacy. When the Sufi clergy then shifted political loyalties, they lost the support of the opposition while simultaneously failing to win the trust of loyalists. This made it easier for the regime to sideline them later once they were no longer needed to control local communities.

---


3.1. Qudsaya and al-Hameh: Reconciliation Assassinated

The town of Qudsaya is located on the banks of the River Barada, west of Damascus. It forms a socially contiguous region with the neighbouring town of al-Hameh, the inhabitants of which are linked to its own by kinship bonds. It is inhabited predominantly by conservative Sunnis, the majority of whom are Sufi disciples of the clerics Rajab Deeb, who died in 2016, and Adnan al-Afyouni, the Mufti of Rural Damascus, who was killed in October 2020. The region has long been economically dependent on trade, construction and tourism. Prior to 2011, Qudsaya’s population was estimated at 150,000 and al-Hameh’s at 45,000. Army units – particularly those of the Republican Guard – had long ago expropriated significant areas of land in al-Hameh and Qudsaya on which they built housing for the families of military officers. Over time, these housing complexes turned into large residential compounds containing thousands of residents, most of them Alawites. This became a source of tension and conflict after 2011.

The area fell outside regime control at the start of 2012 and was subjected to a choking siege imposed by the Republican Guard and allied Alawite militias, while local armed factions took over the defence of the territory. Local community-based reconciliation committees were formed shortly after the opposition gained control of the area to negotiate with the regime over fuel, food and prisoner exchanges. The committee established in Qudsaya was headed by Sheikh Adel Mesto, a close associate of Adnan al-Afyouni. By comparison, the reconciliation committee in al-Hameh was more representative of the opposition and included prominent activists alongside religious clerics.

Following violent clashes in November 2015, a reconciliation agreement was reached overseen by the Republican Guard. In exchange for lifting the siege on the region, 135 people left the area for Idlib in northwest Syria. The agreement did not last long as the regime subsequently re-tightened the siege and intensified the shelling of the region. In October 2016, in the midst of this military escalation, the regime launched a “final settlement” initiative. In return for ending the siege on al-Hameh and Qudsaya the opposition would have to surrender its weapons. The military pressure was accompanied by demonstrations in Qudsaya in support of the settlement and against displacement in a spectacle that would be repeated by other reconciliation committees seeking to justify their acceptance of the settlement as a response to popular demand. This time, the agreement stipulated that the Republican Guard was principally responsible for implementing and following up on the reconciliation, while Mufti al-Afyouni was to supervise the process. Meanwhile, the regime’s Political Security agency assumed responsibility for security in al-Hameh and Qudsaya. As a result, the regime issued a list of 200 people who were ordered to leave Qudsaya, while in al-Hameh 117 people, including two members of the reconciliation committee, were also displaced. The total number of people who rejected the settlement and were consequently expelled to Idlib was 2,364, most of them civilians.

In March 2017, the regime broke the terms of the settlement agreement, forcing young people to volunteer in the Republican Guard and fight against the opposition elsewhere in the country. In Qudsaya in April 2018, over 40 people were summoned to be investigated by Political Security on charges of “corruption,” many of whom were working on the reconciliation efforts. They included, most notably, the leader of the pro-regime Popular Committees and two local mukhtars (a mayor-like official position dating from the Ottoman era). Political Security had already previously arrested opposition members were welcome to take the risk of staying in place and applying for security clearance from the regime. Those who declined would be expelled from the area.


Despite these waves of displacement, the current population of Qudsaya is estimated at 225,000, while that of al-Hameh is estimated at 60,000. Given the relative calm in the area, both towns have hosted many IDPs, especially from Eastern Ghouta and Deir ez-Zor.
Bassam al-Boushi, a member of Qudsaya’s reconciliation committee. In June 2018, nearly 200 people from Qudsaya, including reconciliation committee members, were wanted by the Criminal Security branch, which had become Political Security’s strike force in the area. The reconciliation committee sought the help of Mufti al-Afyouni, who in turn approached the commander-in-chief of the Republican Guard in an effort to find a solution and prevent the detention of Qudsaya youths, but to no avail. In al-Hameh in July 2018, Mamoun al-Nimr, a member of the reconciliation committee and one of the town’s most prominent dignitaries, was arrested and detained for a full year.

The Qudsaya reconciliation committee has lost its impact over time and no longer exerts any influence on either the regime or local residents. In March 2020, Said Mesto, the son of Sheikh Adel Mesto, was arrested and transferred to Sednaya Military Prison, which starkly demonstrated the decline in Sheikh Mesto’s stature in the eyes of the regime. Only after the personal intervention of Mufti al-Afyouni did the regime release the young man, who was a volunteer in a militia affiliated with the Republican Guard. By contrast, the al-Hameh committee continues to enjoy some influence due to the relative weakness of the Sufi religious bond among its members, who are instead bound more by family ties.

On 22 October 2020, the killing of Mufti al-Afyouni – when he was leaving the al-Sahaba mosque in Qudsaya33 – represented a further setback for the Sufi clergy and for the reconciliations he personally oversaw in Rural Damascus. Al-Afyouni indeed played an important role in bringing about the reconciliation and displacement agreements, particularly in Daraya and Qudsaya, where he had large numbers of disciples and supporters. He was also made director of the al-Sham International Islamic Centre for Confronting Terrorism and Extremism,34 where he helped formulate the regime’s discourse in opposing the revolution.35

As in other areas recaptured by the regime, the head of the local Baath Party branch – Nabil Razma, who is close to the Republican Guard – was appointed to head the town council in September 2018. Razma retained both positions until his assassination in August 2019, when an explosive device detonated in his car. The Baath also benefited from heavy displacement to al-Hameh and Qudsaya, swelling its ranks with large numbers of IDPs to the point that the latter made up the majority of its local leadership.

While Qudsaya and al-Hameh form a socially and religiously homogeneous region subjected to the same circumstances of siege and war, the post-reconciliation phase has revealed fundamental differences between the two towns related to the makeup of their respective reconciliation committees. While the Sufi community enjoyed primacy during the initial reconciliation phase in Qudsaya, its significance faded thereafter, and it failed to establish itself as a leading social force. In al-Hameh, by contrast, bonds of kinship were more decisive in forming the town committee, which helped preserve roles for certain actors following reconciliation. The Qudsaya model would later be broadly replicated in the cases of Yalda and southern Damascus, while the al-Hameh model would find echoes in Moadhamiyat al-Sham.

33 Prior to his appointment as the Mufti of Rural Damascus in 2013, al-Afyouni had been the main preacher at the al-Sahaba mosque in Qudsaya, a role that was then taken on by Sheikh Adel Mesto, with al-Afyouni merely holding weekly religious instruction in the mosque.

34 The institute is affiliated with the Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments and was established in May 2019 and inaugurated by President Bashar al-Assad.

3.2. Yalda and Southern Damascus: Conflicting Committees

The town of Yalda is located in the administrative sub-district of Babbila in the Central Rural Damascus District. Before 2011, its inhabitants numbered around 20,000. Together with Babbila and Beit Sahm, it forms a single conservative Sunni community with a Sufi majority. The three towns are collectively known as the southern Damascus towns. To their west, the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp was controlled by Islamic State (IS) from 2015 to 2018. To their south, the Shiite town of Sayyidah Zaynab is controlled by Shiite militias, most notably Lebanese Hezbollah.

The regime lost control of Yalda and southern Damascus in general in mid-2013, after which the towns were subjected to a suffocating siege. The first truce between the opposition and the regime was in March 2014 at a time when IS seized control of Yalda for a short period before opposition forces soon expelled it from the locality.36

In late 2016, a reconciliation committee was formed in southern Damascus named the Political Committee. It comprised both civilians and military personnel, including the Sheikhs Saleh al-Khatib from Yalda,37 Anas al-Tawil from Babbila and Abu Abdo al-Hindi from Beit Sahm along with representatives of the leading opposition armed factions (Jaysh al-Ababil, the Damascus Division, Sham al-Rasul and Jaysh al-Islam). While these sheikhs were among the most prominent Sufi clerics in post-2011 southern Damascus,38 most of the armed factions represented leaned towards Salafism. In November 2016, the first meeting was held between the Political Committee and senior officers from the regime’s Patrols Branch, a division of the Military Security agency responsible for reconciliations in southern Damascus, to discuss de-escalation and focus on confronting IS.

Over time, a conflict arose within the Political Committee. A faction led by the Sufi sheikhs was calling for reconciliation with the regime while the armed opposition leadership was pushing either for continued fighting or, in the worst-case scenario, accepting a Russian-guaranteed agreement with the regime. In November 2017, the dispute went public when the opposition brigades in Yalda supported replacing Sheikh Saleh al-Khatib with Sheikh Abu Rabih al-Biqai in the Political Committee after al-Khatib had demonstrated loyalty to the regime. Shortly afterwards, in January 2018, the opposition factions carried out a security operation against Sheikh Anas al-Tawil’s group and its armed cell in Babbila.39 At this point, the Political Committee disintegrated and each part negotiated separately: the sheikhs under distinct reconciliation committees for each town, and the opposition brigades under a military committee.

In March 2018, the sheikhs rejected a Russian proposal for reconciliation that would have required the withdrawal of the armed opposition from the region after the removal of IS from Yarmouk. Armed factions were divided over the Russian proposal. Jaysh al-Ababil, Ahrar al-Sham and the Damascus Division—all of which are Salafist—were in favour of the proposal, the Sufi-leaning Sham al-Rasul faction was divided between supporters and opponents of the idea and Jaysh al-Islam insisted on remaining and fighting.40

---

36 Abu Sayyah Faramah from Yalda became the ‘Emir’ (commander) of IS in the Yarmouk camp.
37 Sheikh Saleh al-Khatib is a follower of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. He is the imam of the Salihin Mosque in Yalda. He assumed the presidency of the Yalda reconciliation committee and issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) permitting the consumption of cat and dog meat during the siege. He is among the town’s most influential people in the eyes of residents. He supported the opposition in 2011, worked in the relief field and headed the town’s *sharia* board.
38 In southern Damascus there was a large group of prominent Sufi sheikhs, such as Sheikh Nader Abu Omar and Khaled al-Kharsa. However, they chose to be neutral and refused to interfere in politics.
39 The operation came after the opposition Jaysh al-Ababil faction accused the Sheikh Anas al-Tawil group of killing one of its members.
40 The insistence of Jaysh al-Islam on fighting was in accordance with its overall strategy in Eastern Ghouta, where they were at the time negotiating to stay in Douma.
With the launch of the final military operation against IS in Yarmouk in April 2018, the regime proposed that the opposition should fight alongside its forces but the factions declined.\(^{41}\) On 29 April 2018, a final agreement was brokered by Russia between the regime and the armed opposition factions. This agreement required the opposition to permit Russian military police to enter the three towns and to implement a comprehensive reconciliation or else to relocate to northern Syria.

In the event, approximately 9,500 people from the whole of southern Damascus opted for displacement to the north. They included the majority of the fighters, many of whom were Palestinians from Yarmouk and IDPs from the Golan Heights.\(^{42}\) With the Sufi sheikhs calling on the townspeople to remain and enticing them with promises of additional privileges, relatively few of the towns’ native inhabitants chose to leave. Of Yalda’s 25,000 residents at the time, for example, only 422 opted to depart. Similarly, only a very small number of fighters and leaders from the Sham al-Rasul brigade relocated to the north.

On the implementation of the agreement, Russian forces were deployed at the frontlines of Sayyidah Zaynab and its surroundings while regime forces took over the fronts against IS. From that point onwards, the reconciliation sheikhs began working on expelling the Russians from the region, endeavouring to bring in the Iranians instead. This was primarily due to the Military Security branch’s intolerance of Russian deployment in an area adjacent to Damascus that it considered its sphere of influence. When Sheikh Anas al-Tawil returned to Damascus after several months in exile, he entered the region accompanied by a Shiite cleric from Sayyidah Zaynab, who delivered a sermon about Sunni-Shiite unity and the imperative to bury the disputes of the previous years. With support from the Patrols Branch, the proponents of reconciliation sought to form armed cells to replace the Russian military police. Moreover, Abu al-Nur al-Khatib, the brother of Sheikh Saleh al-Khatib, was tasked with creating and leading a local militia staffed by Yalda natives who had volunteered with the Popular Committees.

Less than two months after reconciliation, Russia’s military police withdrew from its positions and confined its duties to daily patrols in the three towns before reducing its presence further in October 2018 to around 100 personnel. Yalda and southern Damascus came under the overlapping control of no fewer than three Military Security branches: the Palestine Branch, the District Branch and the Patrols Branch. Meanwhile, the Fourth Division ended up controlling the whole of southern Damascus and began recruiting young men for military service in its ranks.\(^{43}\)

At this stage, local opinion began to diverge from the stances of the reconciliation sheikhs. The residents did not want the Russians to leave the area and neither did they wish to turn the page with the town of Sayyidah Zaynab. This rift with the reconciliation sheikhs deepened after June 2018, when the regime carried out arbitrary arrests of former opponents who had opted to ‘settle’ their status. The sheikhs began to sense the unease among the community and that the regime was ignoring them. In December 2018, Military Security launched a large wave of arrests of defectors and military draft evaders, tortured former opposition fighters and issued lists of thousands of people wanted for military service. In April 2019, the regime took further measures against figures associated with reconciliation arresting aid workers known to have supported it. Three months later, Military Security carried out arrests of numerous reconciliation committee members across the three towns, including the brothers Ghalib and Ziad al-Biqai in Yalda. After the release of the latter, all the reconciliation committee members were prevented from leaving the southern Damascus towns, around which a

\(^{41}\) The opposition considered the regime’s proposal exploitative, pressing them to join a battle that no longer concerned them after they had decided to withdraw from the region.

\(^{42}\) 12,000 Palestinians were displaced to towns south of Damascus. In the last displacement, nearly 5,000 fled.

tight security cordon was re-imposed. The arrests continued from then until September 2020 with neither the committees nor the Sufi sheikhs able to intervene and put a stop to them. When a new Patrols Branch head was appointed in November 2019, he was visited by a delegation of sheikhs and committee members in southern Damascus, to whom he said, “The reconciliation is complete [...] you have nothing to do from now on.”

Sheikh Saleh al-Khatib resumed his old life as a mosque sheikh and remains able to move with relatively few restrictions, but he has lost the influence he once had. The same goes for Sheikh Anas al-Tawil. Sheikh Abu Rabih al-Biqai, a member of the Yalda Political Committee, was exempted from compulsory military service, but otherwise wields no influence at present. Meanwhile, Sheikh Abu Abdo al-Hindi, from Beit Sahm, was forced to flee Syria after extensive restrictions were imposed on him and his children. The marginalisation of these sheikhs and their loss of influence do not appear to be the result of a coherent strategy pursued by the regime. The continued arrests of reconciliation committee members has led many town residents to conclude that the sheikhs failed to protect the community from the regime. At the same time, the late conversation by sheikhs to the loyalist camp failed to win the regime’s sympathy. Their attempts to bring in Iran to counter the Russians were not popular with the people either.

At the level of state institutions, ex-Mayor Muhammad Abd al-Rahman Hamed returned to his former position in 2018. Hamed did not leave the town during the time of opposition rule but maintained close relations with the security and party apparatuses. Similarly, the former head of the local Baath Party division, Ibrahim al-Asheq, who had moved to Damascus during the opposition period, was re-appointed to the Yalda reconciliation committee. His brother Yusuf, who had been a leader in the armed opposition, chose to ‘settle’ with the regime. The two brothers then worked together to draw up lists of opposition fighters who wished to reconcile and volunteer with regime forces before the displacement process got underway.

Regarding the militias, in addition to the Popular Committees (affiliated with the National Defence Forces) established by Sheikh Abu al-Nur al-Khatib, the former opposition field commander Mustafa al-Qusayr founded a militia affiliated with the Fourth Division. Despite this, al-Qusayr was briefly arrested by the Palestine Branch in July 2019. Abu Hassan Rashid, a member of the reconciliation committee who is also an uncle of al-Qusayr, established a branch of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party’s Eagles of the Whirlwind militia before the Russians shut it down in early 2020. Due to the warm ties between Rashid, his brother Abu al-Nour and the Fourth Division, they are now the only ones who venture to enquire about the status of Yalda’s detainees after the reconciliation, in exchange for money. The Rashid brothers also oversee most of the commercial activity in Yalda, enjoying a near monopoly on the entry of foodstuffs due to these relationships.

In the towns of southern Damascus, a certain rivalry between Iran and Russia may clearly be perceived. The reconciliation committees attempted to play on this rivalry to the benefit of the local area. In this, however, they enjoyed no success, as the Russians quickly lost interest in the region. Thereafter, it fell wholly under the sway of the regime’s security and military apparatuses closest to Iran. The upshot was a marginalisation of the dignitaries and Sufi sheikhs who had played such a key role in the reconciliations and conscription of the young into the regime’s security services and military brigades.

4. The Role of Community Networks

Despite similarities in the degrees of displacement and the limited external intervention, the cases of al-Tall and Moadhamiyat al-Sham differ from Yalda and Qudsaya in that local actors continue to play roles representing and leading their local communities. What al-Tall and Moadhamiyat al-Sham have in common is a flexibility of their social networks in adapting to the post-reconciliation phase. In both towns, strong social and family networks were of great significance during the revolution, as they continued to be in the reconciliation and post-reconciliation periods, which prevented large-scale displacement, for example. A distinction can be made here between the predominantly civilian networks in al-Tall and the paramilitary character of the networks in Moadhamiyat al-Sham. In both cases, however, it was family ties that bound the networks together rather than religious ones.

In both al-Tall and Moadhamiyat al-Sham, the political climate that had prevailed prior to 2011 also emerged as a further element reinforcing family ties, seemingly helping to sustain a bare minimum of political activity despite the total dominance of the regime. Both towns have historically been conservative in social terms, and have been contested politically between Nasserists, the Muslim Brotherhood and to some extent communists. In consequence, the community had long possessed an ability to organise and mobilise, which the regime was unable to eradicate entirely despite decades of Baathist hegemony.

4.1. Al-Tall: The Neutral Opposition

Al-Tall is a town in the Qalamoun region and the centre of the al-Tall district. The town has long been home to Qalamoun’s wealthier residents, who are not obliged to seek employment in Syria’s state institutions due to their tendency to emigrate and work abroad. The town is socially conservative, and politically divided between Nasserists and the Muslim Brotherhood. Prior to 2011, its population was approximately 150,000.

When regime forces lost control of al-Tall in August 2012 leading to violent clashes, tens of thousands of residents fled the town including its most prominent local dignitaries and figures. This left a vacuum that would soon be filled by a group of activists headed by Abu Husam Jamous in coordination with the Inash al-Faqir charitable association to meet the needs of the remaining residents. The group conducted negotiations with the regime. It succeeded in enabling the return of residents to the town several months later and in providing services for them. The al-Tall reconciliation committee was thus formally established and known at the time as the Communication Committee between the regime and the opposition. Its members included socially acceptable people affiliated with the regime. After the tightening of security measures on al-Tall in early 2013, the military opposition re-emerged and seized control of the town in 2014. This prompted the regime to grant the Communication Committee broader powers by accepting its mediation and agreeing to some of the town residents’ requests. At the same time, the opposition’s trust in the committee also grew, to the point that it allowed it to handle negotiations over prisoners, corpses and the lifting of the siege.

45 Abu Husam Jamous is an elderly businessman from a large respected family of Nasserist political orientation, like many traditional and religiously conservative families in al-Tall.

46 It was established in 1972 and licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

47 For the first time in the ‘reconciled’ areas of Rural Damascus, the Ministry of Reconciliation itself played a role, albeit a marginal one, namely registering the al-Tall communication committee and recognising it as a reconciliation committee. In no other case mentioned in interviews or observed in the history of reconciliation had the Ministry of Reconciliation had a notable role.

48 A war took place between Islamist factions in al-Tall and its surroundings, which ended with the al-Nusra Front expelling a group from IS that tried to establish itself in the town at the start of 2016.
These developments brought about a relative calm in the town, which attracted IDPs from worse-off areas surrounding it. Al-Tall received two thirds of the IDPs from Ghouta and Qalamoun, so that its population ballooned to nearly a million. The wealth and renowned generosity of the people of al-Tall meant these IDPs were always fed and sheltered, which spared the regime the burden of hosting them in Damascus. This delicate balance helped protect the city against military operations, which the regime understood would be at its own expense. Given the town’s substantial over-population, the Communication Committee struggled with a lack of services and weak capabilities. This led to the creation in late 2015 of the Families Council, which was a civilian representative body supported by the Communication Committee and the town’s dignitaries. A general assembly was also formed, comprising hundreds of family representatives. It elected 30 representatives as members of the Families Council and agreed on a Council chairman. Both the Families Council and the Communication Committee were placed under the authority of the al-Tall town council.

At the end of 2016, the security situation escalated, and the Families Council was superseded by the Communication Committee, which negotiated a reconciliation agreement with the regime in November 2016 allowing regime forces to enter the town. The implementation of the agreement resulted in the evacuation of 500 armed opposition fighters and 1,500 other residents who rejected the settlement. As in Qudsaya, the regime was represented in the negotiations by the Republican Guard and Political Security. In the post-reconciliation phase, Political Security would control the town with military support from the Republican Guard. As in other areas, state structures were installed from above. In the September 2018 municipal elections, Salim al-Habashi, a businessman and son of a former MP, joined the al-Tall town council, while Jihad Selas, the town’s mayor during the period of opposition control, was tipped for a key position in the new executive town council. Selas is known for his hostility toward the Families Council, having helped bring about its dissolution in late 2016. Bassel al-Samal, a figure accepted by the regime but disliked by local residents, was appointed head of the town council. This council quickly faced a crisis of communication with the people in the light of the serious shortage and pollution of drinking water. In an attempt to mend the rift between the municipal council and the dissolved Families Council, in mid-2018 a Local Development Committee was formed affiliated with the town council and including members of both the Communication Committee and the Families Council. The first achievement of this Development Committee was to restore relationships with the town’s expatriates in the Gulf and to take advantage of the symbolic representation of their relatives and the people’s trust in them to gather the funds necessary to dig wells and resolve the town’s water problem.

The dissolution and restructuring of organisational structures which emerged in the period of opposition control of al-Tall were not limited to the Families Council. The Communication Committee was also disbanded at the end of 2019, although some of its members are still able to negotiate with the regime on matters of public interest, especially Abu Husam Jamous. The Syria Trust for Development, headed by President Assad’s wife, Asma, strove to weaken the Inash al-Faqir charity, leading the Ministry of Social Affairs to intervene to change the charity’s board of directors.

Neither did al-Tall’s organisational model bring about stability in security terms. After the opposition left in late 2016, an unarmed civilian militia called the al-Tall Protection Committee was established.

49 The communication committee obtained the approval of the Damascus Governorate prior to the Families Council elections.
50 The council included five committees: School and Education, Health, Social Services, Support for Reconciliation Committees and Dispute Settlements within the Town.
51 Political Security is subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. It is considered the least brutal of the Syrian security services, and the most capable of communicating with an organisation and benefiting from or infiltrating it.
Six months later, the Republican Guard decided to dissolve and absorb this committee within its own structure. In October 2017, the Guard then established a new armed militia made up of former members of the disbanded Protection Committee. In parallel, the Qalamoun Shield militia, subordinated to the Third Tank Division and led by Abu Zaydun Shamo from al-Tall, included former opposition fighters with whom the regime refused to ‘settle’ and imposed its influence on al-Tall and the surrounding area winning it many enemies. Shamo transformed the militia into an umbrella organisation providing protection for those unable to ‘settle’ with the regime, who were consequently on the run from the security forces. The militia behaved in the manner of a gang, carrying out attacks on property and people. In early April 2018, Russia, which controlled the Third Division, informed the Qalamoun Shield leadership that the militia had to disband. Since February 2020, Shamo has himself been wanted by the security services. While his influence has thus been brought to an end, other militias with ties to the regime continue to undermine stability in the town, with some also enjoying links with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard while others are loyal to Russia.

In sum, given the continued arrests, and somewhat unstable security situation, the transition from the Families Council to the Local Development Committee appears to have led to a decline in the representation and organisation of local residents. However, the situation in al-Tall is still reasonably acceptable for an area formerly under opposition control. This is primarily due to the strength of family ties, which have succeeded in restraining the regime’s heavy-handedness and the efforts to appease it with minimal losses, an achievement not to be dismissed lightly.

4.2. Moadhamiyat al-Sham: Partnering with the Fourth Division

The town of Moadhamiyat al-Sham falls administratively within the Daraya region, just southwest of Damascus bordering the capital’s Mezzeh district. Once famous for its olive cultivation and seasonal crops, it steadily lost its agricultural character from the 1950s onwards when the state expropriated its land for the benefit of the Ministry of Defence. Such expropriation has continued and escalated since the mid-1970s with the aim of establishing a military and security belt on the west of the capital. Prior to 2011, Moadhamiyat al-Sham’s inhabitants numbered around 70,000, of whom 10,000 hailed from various other Syrian regions and resided in the town due to its proximity to Damascus. The other 60,000 comprised a conservative family-oriented community of mostly Nasserist political persuasion. The east of the town contains a neighbourhood mostly inhabited by the families of Alawite officers working at the Mezzeh Military Airport and the Air Force Intelligence agency. Certain social relations existed between some of these officers and their neighbours, which later played an important role during the siege and post-reconciliation phases.

The opposition took control of much of Moadhamiyat al-Sham at the end of 2012. The town formed a united front with Daraya, both of which stood defiantly against the regime. Only by the end of 2015 did the regime manage to separate the two. During the period of opposition control, an active local council was formed in Moadhamiyat al-Sham comprising social actors from large families in the town enjoying relations with the external opposition, which enabled them to finance the council and the opposition factions inside the town. The council’s executive office consisted of four people, most of whom remained influential in the post-reconciliation phase. They were, most notably, the

52 Part of the Mezzeh Military Airport, the Air Force Intelligence headquarters and police housing were built on expropriated land in Moadhamiyat al-Sham. The total area expropriated amounted to 3,377 hectares out of the total area of 4,209 hectares, affecting about 35,000 people. The Syria Report, “Moadhamiyat al-Sham: Expropriation continues!” (in Arabic), 24 June 2020, https://bit.ly/3jFELAc

53 Among others, former Syrian Defence Minister Ali Habib and former Air Force Intelligence chief Jamil al-Hassan resided in Moadhamiyat al-Sham and intervened more than once to resolve matters in the town.
dentist Ali Khalifa, a member of the opposition People’s Party who founded and financed an armed opposition faction, and Abu Jamal Mahmoud al-Khatib, the town’s mukhtar, hailing from its largest family.

By late 2013, the suffocating siege imposed on the town by the Fourth Division was causing a local famine. To facilitate the entrance of food, indirect negotiations took place between the regime and the opposition mediated by Ali Khalifa’s son, Muhammad, through his personal connections with Fourth Division officers. Traders living in the town and others displaced to Damascus also communicated with the opposition to press it to accept a truce proposal. Leading the negotiations to end the siege on the opposition’s side were the businessmen Samir Ghandour and Naim Rajab, who made use of their personal contacts in Air Force Intelligence and the Fourth Division. On the other side, the talks were spearheaded by Gen. Ghassan Bilal, the former director of the Fourth Division’s Security Bureau, and Hassan Issa, who would go on to head the Air Force Intelligence’s Special Task Force in 2019. Moadhamiyat al-Sham’s reconciliation committee was formed at the end of 2013, comprising most of those negotiating on behalf of the local residents.

In July 2015, regime forces managed to isolate Moadhamiyat al-Sham from Daraya. This was followed by a total displacement of Daraya’s residents in mid-2016 after a violent military campaign. In Moadhamiyat al-Sham, reconciliation took place in September 2016 based on an agreement concluded under Russian auspices, resulting in the evacuation to northern Syria of 500 activists and fighters who had rejected reconciliation plus their families.

As soon as the security situation stabilised in the town, a group of pro-regime employees were re-appointed to the municipal council. The former mayor, Hassan Abu Zayd, returned to his post until the September 2018 elections, which resulted in the appointment of Bassam Saada as the new mayor. Bassam Karbouj, a former mayor, was also reappointed to the municipal council, as was Mahmoud Barghasha, a member of the reconciliation committee and a former armed opposition faction leader.

The reconciliation agreement stipulated that a brigade would be formed as an internal police force, which would be led jointly by town locals and regime forces. The brigade was to be responsible for the regime’s military positions on the outskirts of the town, for conducting patrols inside the town, maintaining security and arresting those wanted by regime forces. However, instead of a police force, a local militia dubbed the Shield of the Capital was established under the supervision of the Fourth Division. Its ranks included many from the town drawn in by family ties. From late 2016 onwards, the militia was led by Khaled Khodhr, the former leader of the al-Fath al-Mubeen opposition brigade, until at the end of 2019 the Fourth Division’s Security Bureau appointed the reconciliation coordinator, Hassan al-Ghandour, as the brigade’s new leader.

Personal relationships and acquaintances with officers of the Fourth Division played a large role in the appointment of former opposition commanders as local militia leaders. They attracted volunteers and assumed responsibility for security in the militias. A notable example was Samir al-Ghandour, whose protection was ensured by Ali Khalifa’s relationship with the Fourth Division, enabling him to continue his social activities and address the issue of detainees. Another was Muhammad Rajab, the town’s reconciliation coordinator, along with his father Naim, who enjoyed a strong relationship with Ghassan Bilal. Their influence expanded after the evacuation of some opposition leaders to northern Syria and was strengthened further still through their close relationships with officers from the Russian reconciliation centre at Hmeimim Air Base. Muhammad Rajab currently partners with Abu Jamal Mahmoud, the reconciliation committee member and former mukhtar, to restore official buildings.

---

54 Officially the Syrian Communist Party Political Bureau, led by the long-time opponent of the regime, Riad al-Turk.
55 Interview with a former local councillor via WhatsApp, 2 June 2020. See also Humanitarian Access Team, “Reconciliation and Remobilisation,” op.cit.
This collusion between the Fourth Division and Moadhamiyat al-Sham’s locals is thought to have caused a degree of official anger within the regime. In a rare move, the town was formally taken out of the Division’s hands by Damascus. In June 2019, in the presence of the Division’s senior official responsible for the town, Col. Yasser Salhab, National Security Bureau chief Maj. Gen. Ali Mamlouk ordered a delegation of Moadhamiyat al-Sham representatives to transfer the town’s security file to Military Security while retaining Col. Salhab as a liaison officer in the town.\textsuperscript{56}

The defeat of the opposition, and fear of what might come next caused social ties based on kinship and personal acquaintance to play key roles in reshaping Moadhamiyat al-Sham’s civil space after reconciliation. The decision by some opposition faction leaders who had remained in the town after reconciliation to switch loyalties to the regime prompted most members of their factions to do the same. Loyalist militias were thus formed in the town, such as the erstwhile opposition al-Fajr Brigade, the members of which then joined the Shield of the Capital under the influence of their commander, Ali Khalifa. The town’s largest family, the al-Khatibs, abided by the decisions of the mukhtar and Abu Jamal and its members volunteered in the local loyalist militias under his encouragement. Personal acquaintances with Fourth Division officers also helped local figures to preserve their social status after reconciliation on condition that they used their family networks to recruit young relatives into local loyalist militias.

However, unlike in al-Tall, where the development committee succeeded in finding a solution to the drinking water crisis, the networks in Moadhamiyat al-Sham failed to improve the living conditions of the local residents.\textsuperscript{57} Instead, they turned into an extension of the regime’s security apparatus and were used to help control tens of thousands of residents living in extremely difficult conditions. On the other hand, this arrangement protected Moadhamiyat al-Sham’s people from arrests in the post-reconciliation phase, which the activists in al-Tall were unable to do.

\textsuperscript{56} Sawt al-Asima, “Mamlouk Meets with the People of Moadhamiyat al-Sham and the Fourth Division outside the Town” (in Arabic), 2 July 2019, \url{https://bit.ly/2EPk0Uj}.

\textsuperscript{57} Contamination of drinking water with sewage caused 1,500 cases of poisoning in Moadhamiyat al-Sham alone in October 2020.
Conclusion

While the Rural Damascus region is often viewed as a uniform entity subject to homogeneous conditions of regime military and security control following reconciliation, there are in fact key differences between its constituent areas. These differences are the result of a combination of factors that have affected the course of reconciliation and displacement in disparate ways. Local actors faced a variety of fates following reconciliation, ranging from complete displacement to a gradual side-lining of their influence to inclusion in one form or another in certain representative institutions or militias loyal to the regime. This is not to say local communities have managed to secure real representation for their socially prominent figures but rather that, in some cases, they have demonstrated a flexibility that has helped preserve a role of some kind for them in the post-reconciliation phase. These outcomes, however, were not determined by the will of local communities alone but were also dependent on external interactions and personal relations with the regime’s military and security forces.

For its part, the regime successfully established a set of administrative and political structures through which it rehabilitated local Baath leaders, civil servants and a class of businessmen who maintained their loyalty during the periods of opposition control. The official security and military forces, which are now the de facto rulers in these formerly opposition-held areas, have also become more organised and cross-coordinated. Without exception, these power structures are strictly authoritarian constructions which by nature are rarely representative of the populations they rule.

Two to four years after the reconciliation agreements, depending on the locality, the local actors who were either imposed from above through formal governance structures or were left over from the reconciliation committees seem to have had little success in securing stability and a minimum level of services for their local communities. The dysfunction of the state as the sole service provider combined with the exhaustion of local communities after years of devastating war have hindered the ability of local actors to communicate the voices of their communities, not least while the regime continues to employ both symbolic and actual violence as virtually its sole means of control.