

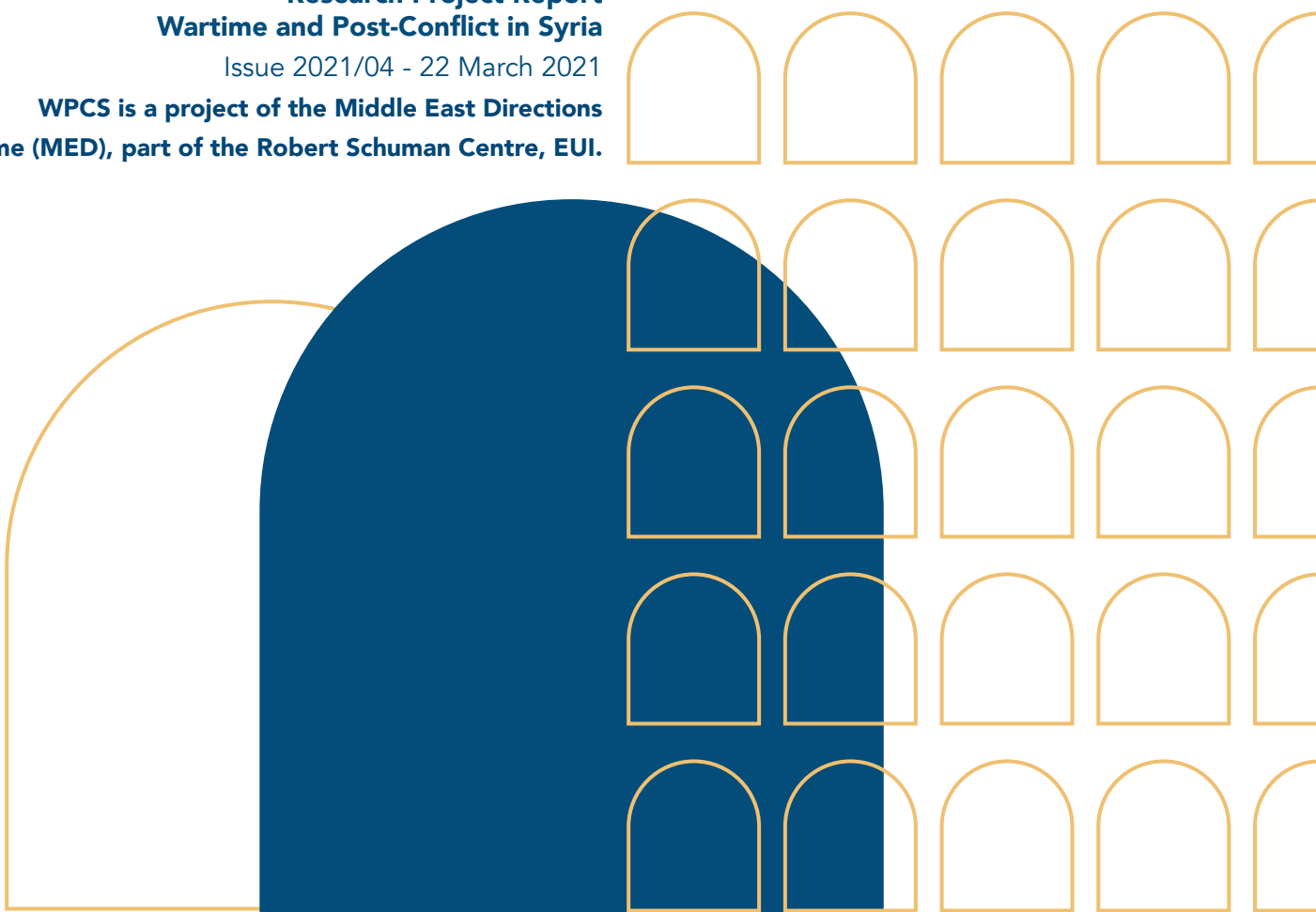
# Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria

Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi

**Research Project Report  
Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria**

Issue 2021/04 - 22 March 2021

**WPCS is a project of the Middle East Directions  
Programme (MED), part of the Robert Schuman Centre, EUI.**



© European University Institute, 2021. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.  
Editorial matter and selection © Abdullah Al-Jabassini and Mazen Ezzi, 2021

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by  
European University Institute (EUI)  
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014  
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy



Funded by  
the European Union

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

# Tribal 'Sulh' and the Politics of Persuasion in Volatile Southern Syria

Abdullah Al-Jabassini\* and Mazen Ezzi\*\*

---

\* Abdullah Al-Jabassini holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Kent in Canterbury. He is a research fellow on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project in the Middle East Directions Programme at the European University Institute in Florence. He is also an associate fellow on the Striking for the Margins (SFM) project at the Central European University in Vienna and a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C. Al-Jabassini's research focuses on wartime dynamics and their effects on southern Syria in the post-war period.

\*\* Mazen Ezzi is a Syrian researcher working for the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project in the Middle East Directions Programme at the European University Institute in Florence. Ezzi's work focuses on wartime and post-conflict dynamics in regime-held areas.

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Unpacking ‘Sulh’ in Southern Syria</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. ‘Sulh’ Initiatives in Daraa and Sweida: Episodes of Success and Failure</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1. Maintaining Local Order in Eastern Daraa and Sweida	10
2.2. The Impact of Security Fragmentation and Criminal Networks in Tafas and Ariqa	12
<b>3. Navigating Inter-community ‘Sulh’ in Southern Syria: Trajectories, Rivalries and Intruders</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>17</b>

## Executive Summary

While the populations of Syria's southern governorates have opted for distinct approaches to the uprising of 2011 and the subsequent insurgency, Daraa and Sweida today feature similar defining characteristics: a state of lawlessness, rampant violence and unrestrained criminal activities. Under these prevailing conditions, tribal customs and traditions often operate, with clear rules allowing civilians to live and interact with a degree of local order.

In southern Syria, local notables continue to practise tribal *sulh*, a traditional conflict-resolution mechanism, to resolve civilian disputes and to contribute to maintaining some degree of local order. Broadly accepted and embedded customs and traditions, humanitarian activities to help meet basic civilian basic needs and support from the dominant local armed force (where it exists) are the main factors that help local notables to maintain the degree of social authority needed to adjudicate disputes and prevent conflicting parties from returning to violent self-help. At the same time, there are also limitations on when *sulh* processes can succeed. Insights from Tafas city in Daraa and Ariqa town in Sweida suggest that a prevailing security fragmentation and a presence of active criminal networks undermine the local notables' efforts to play this role.

*Sulh* is not limited to resolving intra-community private civilian disputes but may also be adopted to resolve intractable inter-community conflicts in which armed groups are involved. However, in an area of regional contention like southern Syria, domestic, regional and international actors interfere in pursuit of their interests to create, support or spoil ongoing *sulh* processes. This finding is supported by an exclusive body of evidence and rare access that the authors have gained to the backstage of various and competing *sulh* initiatives aimed at resolving the recent conflict between Daraa's Eighth Brigade and local armed groups in western Sweida, all of which took place between March 2020 and March 2021.

## Introduction

For several years, different patterns of political and criminal violence have dominated narratives emerging from southern Syria. In Daraa governorate, two parallel processes – Russian-led negotiations and the state’s use of armed force – succeeded in foiling an almost eight-year insurrection and pushed insurgents to succumb to the state’s return to the region in July 2018.<sup>1</sup> However, the disjointed implementation of the two fundamentally divergent processes has resulted in a demarcation of zones where the presence of the state’s military and security forces ranges from strong to non-existent. In turn, this has prevented a restoration of the state’s full authority in some pockets of Daraa. While open insurgency has ended, the ensuing landscape is characterised by a continuation of violence, albeit with low-grade intensity. The widespread availability of weapons, people’s unresolved grievances, the presence of a significant number of ex-insurgents and a rejection of Iranian-backed militias are core factors that have contributed to the emergence of limited-scale episodes of violence.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, ever since the state returned to the south, hardly a day has gone by without locals hearing accounts of assassinations, kidnappings, IED attacks and fatalities in seemingly hit-and-run incidents. At least 930 verified violent incidents took place in Daraa between August 2018 and February 2021, causing the deaths of more than 790 individuals.<sup>3</sup>

In adjacent Sweida governorate, the Druze sect has remained more neutral towards the Syrian uprising of 2011 and the ensuing insurgency.<sup>4</sup> This neutral stance was enhanced by an undeclared religious *hurum* (excommunication),<sup>5</sup> which discouraged Druze males from joining any of the warring parties, including doing their compulsory Syrian military service outside Sweida governorate. The Druze’s neutrality together with a state of internal fragmentation and the lack of unified leadership that the Druze of Sweida have experienced since 2011<sup>6</sup> have allowed the state to reduce its military and security presence in the region and to direct its attention to active warzones elsewhere in the country. This has allowed a widespread availability of arms and the formation of local armed groups with differing loyalties. However, a set of internal dynamics, a legacy of historical Druze marginalisation by the state and financial support from Druze communities in neighbouring countries have pushed some of these armed groups to contest the state’s local authority. In 2019, the state redirected its attention to Sweida after having reclaimed control over vast swathes of Syria’s territory. Through coercion and tacit reconciliation, the state aimed to penetrate and re-establish control over many local armed groups, and to a certain extent succeeded.

While they have largely followed distinct trajectories since 2011, Daraa and Sweida have gradually arrived at a stage of convergence. In 2021, the two governorates appear to have more features in common than ones which distinguish them, namely exposure to external interference, security fragmentation, a spatial variation in the state’s control and authority, widespread weapons,

---

1 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations,” Working Paper, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/2Vj5okC>

2 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria,” Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2020), <https://bit.ly/34nt2jL>

3 Data collected and verified by Al-Jabassini.

4 Mahmoud al-Lababidi, “The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts,” Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, September 2019), <https://bit.ly/3tKup8y>

5 Druze *hurum* mandates a boycott of excommunicated persons by the Druze religious community.

6 Mazen Ezzi, “A Static Revolution: The Druze Community,” in *Playing the Sectarian Card, Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria*, ed. Friederike Stolleis, (Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015), 39, <https://bit.ly/2OXy8js>

dormant civil resistance movements and a spread of violence and criminal activities.<sup>7</sup> This volatile situation, compounded by dire macroeconomic conditions and the state's inability to reassert firmer control and to perform its fundamental functions, has enabled various local armed and criminal groups to increase their robbery, mugging, kidnapping and drug trafficking activities. The worsening security landscape has also seen increased cases of mutual and *quid pro quo* abductions across the boundary, which in early 2020 led to feuds and hostilities between local armed groups from Daraa and Sweida and pushed Syria's south to the brink of intercommunity violence.

Against the backdrop of the deteriorating security situation, local notables in Daraa and Sweida have not been mere bystanders. They have relied on civilian social arrangements, promoted collaboration and activated channels for negotiations and dialogue to reduce inter- and intra-community violence and contribute to maintaining a degree of normality. However, ten years of conflict had engendered a spatial variation in their capacity to intervene and play an effective social role. In the light of these observations, we address the following main research question. How, and under what conditions, do local notables succeed or fail in intervening and reducing violence in southern Syria? We present original data collected through a series of 80 semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2020 and March 2021 with clan *sheikhs*, religious *sheikhs*, *sulh* judges, family elders, ordinary civilians and senior leaders and members of local armed groups in southern Syria. Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this paper derive from these interviews. To ensure the safety of the interviewees, names and personal identifying information are omitted. Moreover, given the current volatile situation in southern Syria, we refrain from divulging sensitive and confidential evidence that could trigger or exacerbate dormant or ongoing local conflicts in and between Daraa and Sweida.

## 1. Unpacking 'Sulh' in Southern Syria

*Sulh* is a traditional mediation and conflict-resolution mechanism. It is centuries old and involves ideals of collaboration, mediation and settlement to maintain the order and stability of the larger community by persuading aggrieved parties to forego vengeance, accept fair compensation and reconcile. It is exercised and managed by 'local notables:' civilian actors who occupy positions of authority in the family- or clan-based social structure. In southern Syria, this category encompasses clan *sheikhs*, family elders and Islamic clerics in Daraa, the *Mashayikh al-'aqil* (the three top Druze clerics), the *emirs* and family leaders (*pasha* and *za'im al-'ayla*) in Sweida,<sup>8</sup> and individuals that enjoy authority derived from their socio-economic status or any other source in both governorates.<sup>9</sup> These civilian actors have varying degrees of social influence, are renowned for their knowledge of broadly accepted social customs and norms, and they serve a multitude of functions. They regulate interactions, resolve conflicts and maintain a degree of local order and social cohesion.<sup>10</sup>

---

7 Mazen Ezzi, "Sweida Protests: The Start of a New Syrian Revolution?" Blog Post, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 16 June 2020), <https://bit.ly/2NFKoVs>; Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria."

8 In Sweida, there are two emirs, descending from the al-Atrash and the Amer families. *Pashas* are the leaders of powerful families. *Za'im al-'ayla* or *sheikh al-'ayla* are leaders of other families.

9 It is important to note that there is constant change in who is considered a local notable. Socio-economic status, war and displacement are some of the determinants of the rise and fall of local notables.

10 This paper does not cover the political intermediary roles played by local actors between the state authorities and the people. For detailed insights on this subject, see Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, November 2019), <http://bit.ly/38eCzKA>

In both Daraa and Sweida, *sulh* relies on deeply embedded customs, traditions and shared values of forgiveness, honour and dignity to amicably solve violent and non-violent conflicts. It does not rely on coercion or compulsion but instead on local notables' ability to persuade conflicting parties. Therefore, the overall *sulh* process and mediation by local notables may be ultimately seen as an example of the "politics of persuasion."<sup>11</sup> Individuals who seek cost-free justice and fair material and moral compensation often resort first to local notables. Given its effectiveness and its normatively binding outcome, locals in Daraa and Sweida are accustomed to ask local notables to initiate *sulh* in many cases,<sup>12</sup> including intentional and unintentional killing, theft and disagreement over land, especially when their cases are pending in state courts. For many of them, 'Sulh is the master of rulings' (*al-sulh sayed al-ahkam*) has always been the norm.

In the predominantly clan-based governorate of Daraa, *sulh* is widely practised by clan *sheikhs* and family elders. Often, small, nonviolent conflicts are resolved by a single conciliator. However, in the case of a serious offense (e.g., homicide), local notables form a *sulh* delegation (*jaha*),<sup>13</sup> which enforces an immediate truce so as to contain anger and prevent cycles of retaliation. This delegation may invite *sharia* scholars and lawyers to attend and participate in the mediation efforts and in writing the *sulh* deed (*saq al-sulh*). During shuttle diplomacy missions between the conflicting parties, the *sulh* delegation investigates the matter and may well conclude that the solution, for instance in homicide cases, is to pay blood money (*diyya*). The *sulh* is often concluded with a public ritual which demonstrates the restoration of peaceful and robust ties between the conflicting parties, ensuring order, solidarity and social cohesion in the larger community. For example, in cases of successful *sulh* over homicide incidents, a ritual called 'knotting the flag' (*agdet al-riya*) ensues. "This is your flag. The flag of *sulh*, dignity and honour," is recited by one of the *sulh* delegation members while holding a white flag and wandering among the crowds declaring the end of the conflict and the restoration of peaceful relations.

In the family-based governorate of Sweida, *sulh* is centralised and institutionalised. It depends on moral authority and the families' ability to exert social control over the behaviour of their members. In their practice of *sulh*, local Druze notables seek to transform a private dispute between families into a societal matter, to reach a solution, prevent revenge and maintain social harmony. By adjudicating disputes in this manner, local Druze notables protect the dignity of the parties, avert cycles of conflict and preserve civil peace and local order. Whenever their intervention in a conflict is needed, local notables in Sweida form a special mediation committee (*wasata*), which may include one of the *Mashayikh al-'aqil*, a blood judge (*qadi al-dam*)<sup>14</sup> and representatives of the most influential families. The mediation committee oversees the negotiations until it reaches a final settlement, which is usually supervised by guarantors who ensure that no retaliation occurs and the *sulh* terms are implemented. When concluding a *sulh* on a homicide case, a 'knotting the flag' ritual takes place in which the parties declare their acceptance of the final result by reciting the following statement: "In the name of homeland security and the safety of society, in the name of God who has decreed it and what He willed to be done, we accept God's judgment, the moral and material implications of customs and traditions, and the presence of a large crowd."

During the Syrian conflict, customs and traditions in southern Syria often remained active, setting clear rules and allowing civilians to live and interact with some degree of local order. The institution of *sulh* – under different conditions in Daraa and Sweida – was further institutionalised and so became more salient. During the insurgency in Daraa, the erosion of state institutions pushed clan *sheikhs* and family elders who resided in insurgent-held areas to intervene in the judicial realm. They obtained

---

11 Sharon Lang, "Sulha Peacemaking and the Politics of Persuasion," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 3, (2002), 52 and 66.

12 Generally speaking, *sulh* requires agreement among the conflicting parties. The perpetrator family usually requests *sulh*. However, in rare cases the victim's family has appealed for local notables to initiate *sulh*. This said, there have been several cases in which local notables have intervened without a request from either of the conflicting parties.

13 In Daraa, *jaha* is also known as the *sulh* committee (*jajnat al-sulh*).

14 An arbitrator specialised in investigating incidents of killing.



a high degree of agency to deal with conflict management, be it between ordinary civilians, between insurgents or between civilians and insurgents.<sup>15</sup> They often resolved disputes and concluded a *sulh* while the case was still being reviewed by the House of Justice in Hauran (*Dar al-'Adel fi Hauran*), a structure established in November 2014 as a result of the fusion of three rebel-administrated courts: 'Gharz' of the Free Syria Army, 'Cobra' of al-Nusra Front and 'Jillin' of al-Muthanna Islamic Movement. The degree of social authority they enjoyed under insurgent rule together with the effectiveness of their mediation encouraged Daraa's clan *sheikhs* and elders to inaugurate in 2015 their own autonomous judicial bloc known as the Reform Committee in Hauran (*Hay'at al-Islah fi Hauran*), which has looked into and resolved dozens of violent and non-violent cases.<sup>16</sup> When the insurgency was foiled and state institutions re-opened their doors in Daraa in summer 2018, many locals continued to knock on the doors of their *sheikhs* and elders seeking their help to adjudicate disputes.

In contrast to Daraa's insurgent-held areas, in Sweida the state's judicial institutions remained open throughout the conflict. However, the state's tenuous control, the poor performance of its judicial institutions and questions about their integrity and effectiveness tilted the locals' preference to opt for traditional *sulh* as their preferred method to resolve disputes. This allowed Druze notables to play a greater role in the realm of justice. However, *sulh* only remains a mechanism for adjudicating disputes that arise among individuals by utilising social pressure on their families, not for resolving disputes among armed groups.<sup>17</sup> In parallel with the traditional informal *sulh* in Sweida, in 2018 the Council of the Monotheist Druze (CMD) (*Dar Ta'ifat al-Muwahhidin al-Druz*) established the so-called 'Committee for Adjudicating Social Disputes,'<sup>18</sup> which comprises 13 local notables renowned for their practice of *sulh* and deep knowledge of legal arbitration. The committee considers *Mashayikhat al-'aqil* to be the official authorised entity to authenticate *sulh* agreements and validate their outcomes, in an attempt to transform the *sulh* into a central institution confined to the CMD. Since its establishment, the committee has investigated more than 1,100 cases, including very old cases that are still pending at state courts.

---

15 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Tribalocracy: Wartime Social Order and Its Transformation in Tribal Regions – Evidence from Daraa Governorate in Southern Syria" Ph.D. Dissertation, (Canterbury, University of Kent, 2020).

16 Ibid.

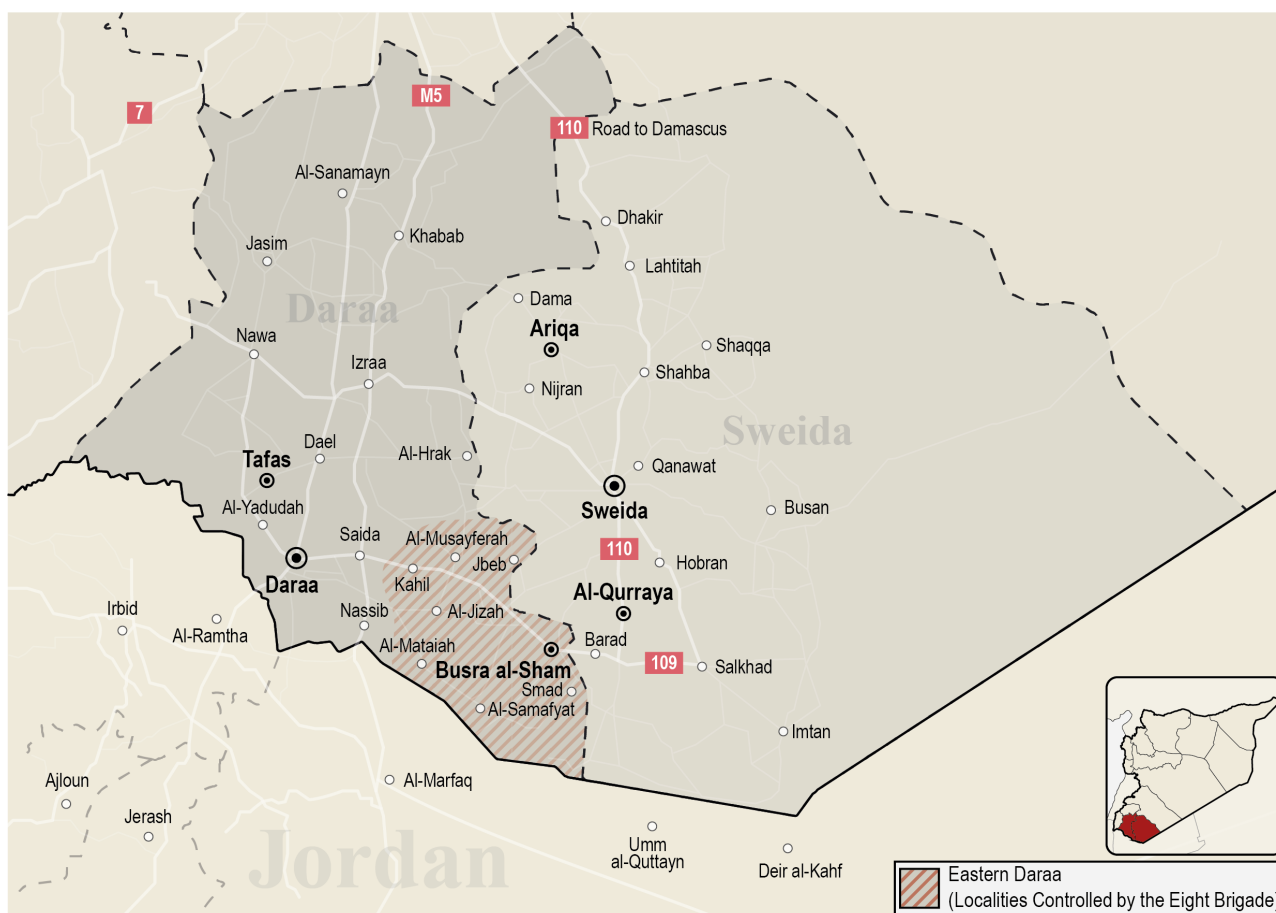
17 Resolving disputes among armed groups in Sweida is an exceedingly rare phenomenon because internal clashes among armed groups are forbidden by Druze religious teaching since they threaten the unity of the Druze sect and endanger its existence.

18 The Council of the Monotheist Druze was founded in 2015 by *sheikh al-'aqil*, Yusif Jarbo'u, as the headquarters of *Mashayikhat al-'aqil* in Ain al-Zaman shrine. This council includes establishments concerned with Druze social, health, charity and religious affairs.

## 2. 'Sulh' Initiatives in Daraa and Sweida: Episodes of Success and Failure

For nearly three years, the volatile conditions that developed in southern Syria under the influence of local, regional and international actors brought about a variation in the authority of the notables in Daraa and Sweida. In some areas, local notables maintained a degree of authority to practise *sulh* and prevent conflicting parties from returning to violence and self-help by relying on: customs and traditions that community members agree on (at least in principle); humanitarian activities in response to basic civilian needs; and the backing of a superior local armed force (where one exists). However, in a few areas, the local notables' ability to play an effective and salient social role was restricted by a fragmented security environment and active criminal networks.

Map 1: Southern Syria: Areas and Localities Under Study



Source: The authors. Graphic Designer: Ayoub Lahouioui

### 2.1. Maintaining Local Order in Eastern Daraa and Sweida

Russian-led negotiations in 2018 not only limited access by the state's security and military forces in some areas of Daraa governorate but also granted privileges to insurgent leaders who participated in negotiations in the post-insurrection era. In eastern Daraa, Ahmad al-Oda, a former leader of the Sunna Youth Forces, showed genuine interest in the Russian mediation overtures, and consequently was entrusted with leading the Eighth Brigade, a subdivision of the Russian-backed Fifth Corps headquartered in the city of Busra al-Sham.<sup>19</sup> Since its establishment in October 2018, the Eighth Brigade has been in charge of handling local security in eastern Daraa. It has run regular patrols on main roads and highways, managed checkpoints, countered illicit drug trafficking and enforced weapon control.

19 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 14 May 2020), <http://bit.ly/2oTzoXG>

In the localities in this region, the clan *sheikhs* and elders have maintained robust ties with al-Oda. Thus, they have preserved the social authority they had previously had in the years of the Sunna Youth Forces' rule but now under the rule of the Eighth Brigade.<sup>20</sup> In eastern Daraa, clan *sheikhs* and elders not only endeavour to meet basic civilian needs but also contribute to local order through their practice of *sulh*.<sup>21</sup> On numerous occasions, they have intervened – individually or collectively through the formation of a *sulh* delegation – and succeeded in resolving disputes over agricultural land borders, robberies, debts and intentional and unintentional killings. “The notables are always our first resort to solve any type of problem,” reported a local from eastern Daraa. Due to their “wisdom,” “honesty” and “intelligence,” as many locals from Daraa have listed their attributes, the *sulh* delegation members have succeeded in persuading conflicting parties to forego vengeance, accept fair compensation and reconcile in numerous reported *sulh* instances in various localities such as Kahil, Gahsm, al-Jizeh and Busra al-Sham. As a local from eastern Daraa explained, “Regardless of how complicated your problem is, notables can solve it over a cup of coffee. They are the safety valve of our community. Without them, violence and chaos would spread in every street of the city.”

In their turn, the commanders of the Eighth Brigade are aware of the strategic importance of the social role played by clan *sheikhs* and family elders. Therefore, they facilitate the endeavours of the latter to launch a *sulh* process by providing the delegation with transport and protection against potential kidnapping or assassination. “The Eighth Brigade is an armed force and is not a judicial body to manage problems. However, we do not hesitate to intervene whenever our *sheikhs* need our help. Our *sheikhs* play an important role, and the Eighth Brigade will always be ready to back their social role,” explained a senior force commander. In a few cases, clan *sheikhs* have called on the Brigade’s leaders to send representatives to attend a *sulh* gathering. This occurs when one of the conflicting parties manoeuvres to evade the final outcome of a *sulh* or signals an intention to retaliate and take the matter into their own hands. For instance, a *sulh* delegation requested the Eighth Brigade to attend a *sulh* that was initiated to solve a case of unintentional killing that took place in a locality in eastern Daraa. Following attempts to evade and manoeuvre, the offender’s clan submitted to the final outcome of the *sulh* process and paid blood money to the victim’s family when the *sulh* delegation members signalled their intention to call on the Eighth Brigade to intervene and ensure implementation of the outcome. “Under conditions of chaos and violence, we need a military force to help preserve the social customs and the notables’ social role,” explained a prominent al-Miqdad clan *sheikh* in eastern Daraa.

In Sweida, on the other hand, local notables rely on a set of core factors to preserve a degree of social authority to carry out a *sulh* and make sure its outcome is implemented. These factors include customs and traditions, religious influence and activities to help meet civilians’ basic needs. For instance, the CMC and *Daret Era*<sup>22</sup> provide some local communities with humanitarian aid and other services, which increases the leverage of local notables.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, and since disputed parties choose particular local notables based on specific criteria deemed crucial to ensure fair *sulh* negotiations and outcomes (e.g. a history of successful and impartial *sulh* initiatives), local notables capitalise on this mechanism of ‘social selection’ to boost their status and enhance their social authority and influence. It is important to note here that few leaders of armed groups or businessmen have capitalised on their personal connections with the state security apparatuses

---

20 Al-Jabassini, “Tribalocracy: Wartime Social Order and Its Transformation in Tribal Regions.”

21 For instance, in December 2020, the clan *sheikhs* of eastern Daraa managed the collection of over 300,000,000 million SYP (USD 100,000 then) to buy medications and medical equipment for the Busra al-Sham hospital in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. See Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria,” Research Project Report, (European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2020), <https://bit.ly/2SKkcYS>

22 Daret Era is the house of al-Atrash’s Emirate in the town of Era, south of Sweida.

23 Over the past few years, the CMD has become the largest contributor to charitable and relief activities in Sweida through a wide range of institutions and associations affiliated with it. The CMC, for instance, has a health department that employs 60 doctors and provides free services in various medical specialties, a social solidarity foundation that provides grants to more than 300 students and a charitable centre that provides food aid to more than 8,000 families.

to emerge as local notables. Their endeavours to ascend have remained limited to solving security-related cases (e.g. kidnapping and robberies) but not participating in *sulhs* whatsoever. For instance, a nouveau riche merchant with close contacts with security officers in late 2020 managed to solve a big theft case after a famous Druze sheikh, appealed to by a delegation of local merchants, failed to do so.

In Sweida *sulh* does not need an executive force. In fact, the involvement of an armed group in a *sulh* initiative could raise concerns of potential bias towards one of the conflicting parties. Therefore, leaders of armed groups in Sweida greatly refrain from intervening in managing civilian disputes. The only exception was Wahid al-Bal'ous, the founder and late leader of the Men of Dignity Movement (*Harakat Rijal al-Karamah*),<sup>24</sup> who took part in several mediation committees and *sulh* processes. However, following his assassination in 2015, no leader of an armed group has enjoyed a similar charisma, strong presence or local authority to participate in a *sulh* or take part in any mediation committee in Sweida. "Most of the leaders of the current armed groups in Sweida are not socially accepted and people distrust them. This is mainly because of their involvement in kidnapping, drugs and weapon trading, let alone their relations with the security apparatuses. For these reasons, their involvement in *sulh* would contradict its objectives and goals," explained a local notable from Sweida.

In Sweida, *sulh* is portrayed by the interviewees as an effective mechanism to resolve civilian disputes except for areas where the social hierarchy has collapsed (as the following section illustrates for Ariqa town). According to many interviewees, local notables in Sweida have been able to employ *sulh* to resolve complex disputes related to property and agricultural land, personal status and inheritance. In several murder cases, a mediation committee has intervened, imposed the surrender of weapons and supervised the payment of blood money. In at least one reported case, in lieu of the blood money a party requested the accused party to take an oath in front of witnesses that he did not perpetuate the alleged crime. In a few instances, disputants have prioritised state judicial institutions or have agreed to engage in a *sulh* process in parallel with an official procedure in a state court.<sup>25</sup> The perceived weakness and corruption of the state's judicial institutions and the worsening economic situation have been factors driving locals' decisions to opt for the fair and cost-free *sulh* mechanism. As a local from Sweida explained, "We no longer have trust in the corrupt and inactive state courts. For us, *sulh* will always reflect justice. *Sulh* is an ancient institution that operated centuries before the formation of modern Syria and its judicial institutions. Does anyone think it wouldn't be able to solve disputes?"

## 2.2. The Impact of Security Fragmentation and Criminal Networks in Tafas and Ariqa

While clan *sheikhs* and elders contribute to maintaining local order through the practice of *sulh* in the localities of eastern Daraa, the scope for their counterparts in Tafas city in western Daraa to perform a similar role is restricted by a fragmented security landscape. Since July 2018, Tafas and its surrounding area have become an enclave for former insurgents. Although the outcome of the Russian-led negotiations has restricted the presence of Syrian military and security forces inside the city, many former insurgents saw reconciling their status and joining the state's forces – albeit nominally – as an effective strategy to remain in their areas and keep their weapons, while other former insurgents have refused to engage in a reconciliation process and remained clustered inside the city with no clear affiliations or loyalty.<sup>26</sup> What ensued was a fragmented security landscape. Under the loose authority of the so-called Central Negotiations Committee (CNC),<sup>27</sup> a multitude of local armed actors with various

---

24 Mazen Ezzi, "The Druze of Suwayda: The Embers of Dissent," *al-Jumhuriya*, 22 September 2015, <https://bit.ly/3aSPeal>

25 The plaintiff may agree to waive his rights in the state court in exchange for the surrender of the perpetrator to the official authorities to achieve public justice.

26 On this local dynamic, see Al-Jabassini, "The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria."

27 The CNC is an aggregation of former insurgents and civilian opposition figures, which was established on 3 July 2018 to ensure the implementation of the outcomes of the Russian-led negotiations. See Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Rampant Violence, Military Escalation, and the Role of Intermediaries in Daraa, Syria," *Middle East Institute*, 1 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3c1lq3F>

affiliations have been forced into covert competition for local influence. This competition is characterised by limited small-scale episodes of violence, often attributed to unknown perpetrators. According to data collected and verified in February 2021, Tafas has witnessed 11% of the assassination, killing and kidnapping incidents that have plagued Daraa governorate since August 2018.<sup>28</sup>

This legacy of security fragmentation has greatly undermined the authority of clan *sheikhs* and family elders in Tafas society. Moreover, unlike eastern Daraa, the absence of a dominant armed actor has prevented them from relying on an executive force to cement their social role. Under these prevailing conditions, the social role of notables in Tafas has atrophied and their interventions to resolve disputes are often in vain. For instance, despite recurring interventions by local notables to initiate a *sulh* and resolve an old dispute between members of the Kiwan and al-Zou'bi clans, intermittent episodes of violent tribal clashes have occurred on many occasions and led to many deaths and injuries.<sup>29</sup> With the local notables' inability to resolve the matter, the tribal clashes have offered the state an opening to exploit tribal disputes to attempt to impose firmer security control.<sup>30</sup> "Weapons in the hands of everyone. As long as we have no unified military body to help us to maintain customs and morals, *sulh* endeavours are a waste of time," stated a prominent clan *sheikh* from Tafas.

Similarly, Ariqa town in north-western Sweida offers another example of the social hierarchy having collapsed, with families having lost control over the behaviour of their members. In Ariqa the presence of active criminal networks has prevented local notables from intervening to solve a local order problem. In 2014, a local armed group was established there and participated in some battles in western Sweida.<sup>31</sup> Soon afterwards, the group ran short of economic resources but found abductions to represent a semi-steady source of finance for its members. By 2015, the town had come under the influence of local criminal groups. The prevailing state of lawlessness in Ariqa and macroeconomic deterioration provided a fertile ground for attracting new members from other localities west of Sweida to practise kidnapping, torture and murder in western Sweida and on the main road connecting Damascus and Sweida city. In the eyes of many locals, these criminal groups operated under a cover provided by the state security apparatuses. Nevertheless, in January 2021, the Syrian military forces entered the town, reportedly after a kidnapping incident had taken place on the Sweida-Damascus main road. However, they withdrew after many members of outlaw groups agreed to reconcile their status and join the Syrian military on the condition that they remained in Sweida governorate.<sup>32</sup> This attempt was to no avail, just like the previous three reconciliations in the last two years. Each time, these criminal groups have resumed their criminal activities after temporarily suspending them.

Amid these conditions, no local notable in Ariqa or western Sweida has been able to intervene and restrain these criminal groups, whose activities have undermined security and social order. A decline in the local notables' economic activities, which were mostly agriculture, has severely limited their ability to influence and attract the criminal groups' social base.<sup>33</sup> In fact, it appears that the Druze community is unable to impose control on the members of these criminal groups due to a lack of effective punitive and deterrent tools. So far, the local notables have done what they could, going so far as to disown gang members.

---

28 Data collected and verified by Al-Jabassini.

29 Between April 2020 and February 2021, for example, recurrent clashes have led to at least 11 deaths and dozens of injuries.

30 The Syrian state detected the use of medium-duty weapons in one of the tribal clashes that took place between members of the al-Zou'bi and Kiwan clans. Following military threats to raid Tafas, Russia has managed to facilitate an agreement to prevent an escalation, which stipulated the surrender of the medium-duty weapons and allowed the Fourth Division to search farms in southern Tafas.

31 Against the jihadist al-Nusra Front insurgent group from Eastern Daraa.

32 In the context of Sweida, 'reconciling status' is an agreement made between a fighter from an armed group and a committee made of representatives of the security apparatus. This reconciliation is meant to assure the committee that the fighter no longer poses a threat to the Syrian state.

33 This decline in agriculture is mainly due to a lack of security during cultivation seasons, frequent kidnappings in agricultural lands, the high prices of seeds, fertilisers and agricultural materials, the scarcity of water and the negative impact on agricultural ownership of a continual need to sell portions of land to feed into social networks.

For instance, the *sheikh* of the Azam family urged the local notables of Ariqa, Dwereh and Ta'ara towns to issue a statement and disown their family members who were participating in criminal activities, all of which happened but to no avail. As families have lost control over the behaviour of their members, local notables have also lost the capacity to intervene and take any *sulh* initiative or even to mediate for the release of kidnapped persons in Ariqa. For instance, in 2017, the *pasha* of the al-Hunedi family failed to launch a *sulh* initiative after gang members burned down some of the Bedouins' homes in Ariqa. Moreover, the *pasha* was threatened by the head of one of the security apparatuses in the southern region and was told not to intervene in the matter. Ariqa not only showcases how the collapse of social structure deprives local notables of their authority but also demonstrates how preventing local notables from practising their social role is a key security strategy adopted by the state to maintain chaos and tensions between local communities.

### 3. Navigating Inter-community 'Sulh' in Southern Syria: Trajectories, Rivalries and Intruders

*Sulh* is not limited to resolving private disputes. In many cases, local notables instrumentalise *sulh* to resolve seemingly intractable inter-community conflicts. This, however, is a more complex process. In an area of regional contention like southern Syria, inter-community *sulh* may lose part of its sociological sense when various domestic, regional and international actors interfere to create, support or spoil a *sulh* process in pursuit of their local and regional interests. The *sulh* that took place between delegations from Daraa and Sweida over the course of 2020 offers an example.

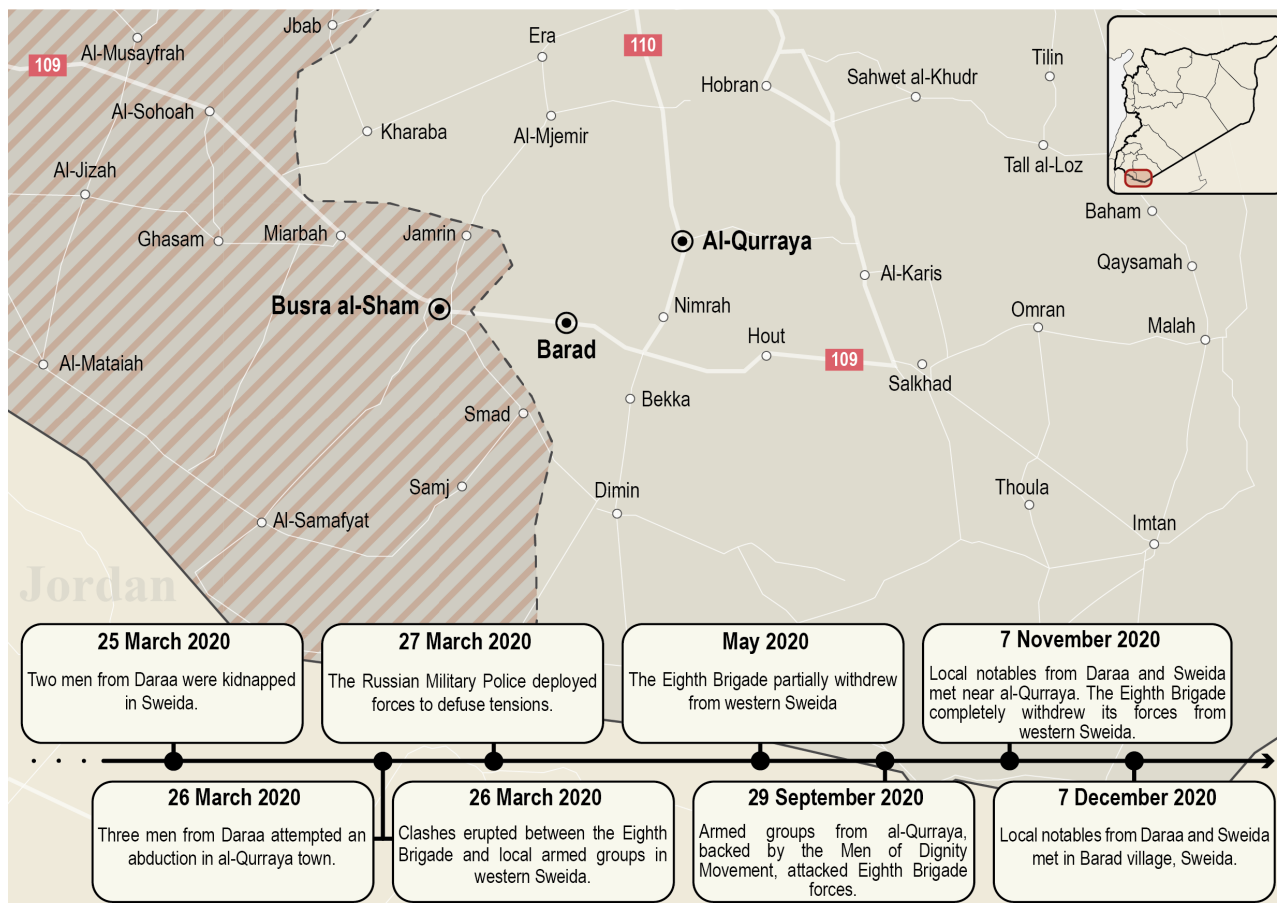
Contrary to a widespread belief, kidnapping in southern Syria is not a recent phenomenon. Many instances of kidnapping between groups in the two governorates have taken place since at least 2012. However, desperate poverty, a security vacuum and an abundance of weapons have made kidnapping for profit a practice that is built on intertwined local networks which many actors, including the state's security apparatuses, capitalise on and rule over. In March 2020, the situation of lawlessness and increasing tit-for-tat kidnappings carried out by local gangs from the two governorates for the first time embroiled the Eighth Brigade from Daraa and local armed groups from al-Qurraya in western Sweida in a series of armed clashes. The dispute began on 25 March 2020 when two men from Daraa were abducted in Sweida and the kidnappers demanded a 20 million SYP ransom for their release (USD 17,000 then).<sup>34</sup> In response, three armed men from Daraa attempted a kidnapping in the town of al-Qurraya. The attempt failed, but they shot three civilians while escaping, leaving one dead and two injured. Rapidly, local armed groups and townsmen of al-Qurraya deployed forces to comb the area before they engaged in clashes with patrols of Daraa's Eighth Brigade near al-Qurraya, which left a total of 19 deaths, mostly on the Druze side, in addition to fresh grievances and vows of retribution.<sup>35</sup> The 19 deaths included five Druze prisoners of war who were allegedly executed later. Nevertheless, while the serious issue for Sweida people was the Eighth Brigade's seizure of 24 km<sup>2</sup> of al-Qurraya's agricultural land, the Eighth Brigade deemed the presence of its forces near al-Qurraya crucial to protect eastern Busra al-Sham and its surrounding areas from kidnapping since the local armed groups in Sweida had failed to do so.

---

34 Mazen Ezzi, "How Can Tension be Contained Between Sweida and Daraa?" (in Arabic), Policy Paper, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 17 April 2020), <https://bit.ly/2MN0uZc>

35 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Southern Syria: 'Sibling Feud' or Engineered Violence?" *Middle East Institute*, 7 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/30lrdgM>

## Map 2: Conflict and Dialogue in Southern Syria Between March and December 2020



Source: The authors. Graphic Designer: Ayoub Lahouioui

Russia, which purportedly worked to limit Iranian influence in the south and prevent a dangerous regional escalation that would destabilise the area near the borders with Jordan and Israel, deployed its military police to prevent further clashes and encouraged the formation of committees to start a *sulh* process. In response to a Druze mediation with Russia – which was interrupted by a lone attack carried out by an armed Druze farmer in late April 2020<sup>36</sup> – the Eighth Brigade partially withdrew from the area. As the local Druze notables were unable to influence the course of events, a widespread feeling of abandonment and neglect pushed local armed groups from al-Qurraya, backed by the Men of Dignity Movement, to carry out an asymmetric armed attack against the Eighth Brigade in September 2020. The uncoordinated attack and the significant power imbalance in favour of the Eighth Brigade caused heavy losses on the Druze side. While the Druze families of the victims and local armed groups rejected assistance offered by Lebanese Hezbollah, which has no military presence in al-Qurraya region, the Eighth Brigade reportedly detected attacks launched using sites staffed by Iran-backed Syrian military and security forces. Therefore, the Brigade perceived the attack as an Iranian attempt to thwart any potential dialogue and collaboration between Daraa and Sweida, hijack the cause of al-Qurraya and fuel an inter-communal war.<sup>37</sup>

The prospect of inter-community conflict led notables from both regions to resort to mediation and a process of *sulh*, an event that many local notables capitalised on to undermine the power of their rivals and boost their own social authority. As a result, several competing *sulh* initiatives have emerged in southern Syria. In Sweida, the first one was launched in the aftermath of a March 2020 al-Qurraya battle

36 According to the local narrative in Sweida, the armed Druze farmer planned his lone attack after he was prevented from ploughing his land by the Eighth Brigade.

37 For Iran, weakening the Eighth Brigade would facilitate establishing a foothold in eastern Daraa and more importantly having access to Busra al-Sham city, the main Shia hub in southern Syria, the Shia residents of which are still prohibited from returning to the city by al-Oda.

and involved the families of the victims and one of the *Mashayikh al-'aqil*, but intervention by the state security apparatuses undermined the process and led to its decline. The second one was initiated by political opposition figures and a notable from western Sweida, independently of the victims' families from al-Qurraya. Despite a rapprochement by one local notable close to the Eighth Brigade, this did not gain momentum due to its escalatory and provocative approach to the state, which alienated local notables in Sweida from it.

In Daraa, on the other hand, numerous *sulh* initiatives emerged and developed, most of which lacked popular support and representation, which eventually led to their demise. In parallel with communications commenced by internal and exiled rivals to al-Oda, a *sulh* initiative was covertly introduced by local notables and supported by the Baath Party in Daraa. In an attempt to weaken the Eighth Brigade and undermine the social authority of the local notables, who enjoyed robust ties with its leadership, the individuals involved in these two processes sought to open backdoor channels with local notables in western Sweida in an attempt to influence the political scene. However, since these initiatives emerged merely as reactions to internal dynamics in Daraa, they lacked popular support and the authority to impose the outcome of their talks on the Eighth Brigade, and so did not receive attention in Daraa or Sweida.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, one initiative was able to dominate the narrative emerging between the two governorates. In Sweida, after the second battle, *emir* Louai al-Atrash of *Daret Era* managed to forge an inclusive and flexible approach in which he included the families of the victims of al-Qurraya, local notables, *Mashayikh al-'aqil* and the Men of Dignity Movement, all while keeping channels open with the state security apparatus in Sweida. Soon afterwards, al-Atrash established a delegation composed of himself, one of the *sheikhs* of *al-'aqil* and many other local notables from Sweida. In Daraa, the governorate's recognised forty clan *sheikhs* and family elders mandated Busra's prominent *sheikh* Awad al-Miqdad, who enjoys robust ties with the Eighth Brigade's leadership, to head a nine-member delegation. On 7 November 2020, the two delegations held a historic assembly on banks erected by the Eighth Brigade in al-Qurraya land, which was followed by a complete withdrawal of the Brigade's forces towards the city of Busra as a goodwill gesture towards the *sulh*, but on the condition that local armed groups from Sweida took responsibility for securing the area. On 7 December 2020, another assembly took place in Barad village in western Sweida in which the two delegations agreed to exchange requests in order to conclude the *sulh* process.

At the time of writing, dialogues and negotiations taking place in southern Syria remain mere initiatives and not instances of complete *sulh*. In order to conclude a *sulh* agreement between Daraa and Sweida, there are several articles awaiting further negotiations and implementation. Sweida's delegation has requested a full investigation into the murder of the Druze prisoners from the al-Qurraya battle, the return of their weapons and payment of blood money. In return, the families of the Druze victims will drop the lawsuits filed before the courts against the Eighth Brigade and its leader, al-Oda. Daraa's delegation, on the other hand, has requested its counterpart in Sweida to take the necessary measures to prevent kidnappings of Daraa's inhabitants in return for preventing similar incidents against Druze people in areas controlled by the Eighth Brigade. While the Eighth Brigade offers Daraa's delegation an integrated and effective armed wing, Sweida's delegation lacks a similar reliable military body to prevent future kidnapping incidents, especially as many gang groups that practise kidnapping in Sweida have close ties with the state's security apparatus and any attempts to oppress them may lead to conflicts with the latter. While no further steps have been taken at the time of writing, the conditions needed to conclude the *sulh* remain an open question and are tied to the interests of domestic, regional and international actors. Clearly, they can either create the conditions to support a fruitful process or impede it altogether and cause a relapse into cycles of violent clashes between the two governorates.

---

38 For an illustration of the popular support for Ahmad al-Oda, see Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Is Ahmad al-Oda Winning the 'Hearts and Minds' of Daraa's People?" *Middle East Institute*, 22 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3drzjhx>



## Conclusion

Examining the active role played by local notables in limiting violence and solving problems affecting local order in southern Syria reveals an often forgotten – yet crucial – phenomenon in conflict resolution: under conditions of pervasive political and criminal violence and in the absence of effective state institutions, tribal customs and practices often continue producing clear rules and allowing civilians to live and interact. Amid volatility in southern Syria, local notables in Daraa and Sweida continue to practise *sulh* to resolve disputes and contribute to local order.

Nevertheless, years of war have produced several factors determining whether local notables have succeeded or failed to utilise *sulh* and reduce risks of intracommunity violence. Insights from eastern Daraa and Sweida show that local notables maintain a degree of local authority to practise *sulh* and prevent conflicting parties from returning to violence and self-help by relying on: customs and traditions that community members agree on (at least in principle); humanitarian activities to help meet basic civilian needs; and backing by a superior local armed force (e.g. the Eighth Brigade). Evidence from Tafas and Ariqa towns meanwhile suggests that local notables' leeway to perform a similarly effective role is restricted by a prevailing security fragmentation and the presence of active criminal networks. In these areas, local notables have not only experienced weakened social influence but their desire to intervene and to mediate is decreasing, which signals an erosion of the institution of *sulh*.

In an area of regional contention like southern Syria, *sulh* may be used to solve inter-community conflicts but may be exposed to overt and covert interventions by additional actors. The strife that arose between Daraa and Sweida governorates in 2020 allowed various domestic, regional and international actors to interfere to support, spoil or even create a *sulh* initiative in pursuit of their own local or regional interests. While one *sulh* trajectory has eventually dominated the narrative, completing it requires sustained dialogue and collaboration between the two communities in order to overcome obstacles created by state and non-state intruders.

Research Project Report  
Issue 2021/04  
22 March 2021

doi:10.2870/547211  
ISBN:978-92-9466-000-8  
QM-02-21-370-EN-N



Publications Office  
of the European Union

