

POLICY BRIEF

Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria

Abstract

The 2021 Daraa al-Balad crisis and its outcomes have opened a new chapter in the history of southern Syria. The trajectory of the conflict, the terms of the final agreement and the ensuing proliferation of new 'reconciliation' processes reveal a clear shift in Moscow's approach in southern Syria. The recent agreements reconfigure local orders and allow the Syrian regime to deconstruct networks of resistance and expand its security control in parts of the south.

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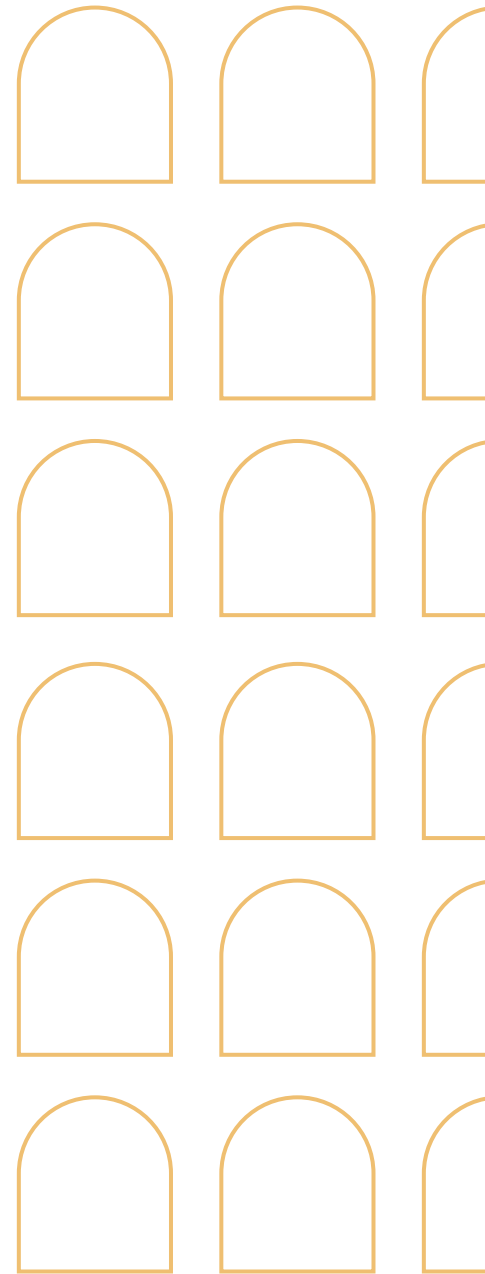
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Introduction

In many respects, the trajectory of the Daraa al-Balad crisis and the way the conflict wound down reveal a clear shift in Russia's approach in southern Syria. While regional politics led Russia to grant former rebels some room for manoeuvre and allowed a restricted return of the regime to southern Syria in 2018,¹ recent changes in regional politics – namely the outcome of the most recent Israeli parliamentary election and the rapprochement between Jordan and Syria – have seemingly prompted Russia to rethink the order that had prevailed in Daraa in the previous three years.² In the 2021 Daraa al-Balad conflict Moscow gradually hardened its position regarding local opposition representatives and with an outright threat to back the Syrian military forces enforced a new deal that favoured the regime and rescinded core terms in the 2018 agreement. Far from being a resolution of a local conflict, it soon turned out that Daraa al-Balad was the first domino to be toppled and the terms of the new agreement were reproduced across many localities in Daraa. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted between June and October 2021 with civilian, military and (un)reconciled rebel actors, this policy brief provides an analysis of the ways in which the 2021 Russian-brokered agreement impact existing networks of resistance and redefine local orders in southern Syria.

1. The Domino Effect: The Daraa al-Balad Conflict and a Proliferation of 'Reconciliation' Processes

On 24 June 2021, the Syrian regime sieged the Daraa al-Balad area, the old part of Daraa city that had been under rebel control until the 2018

Russian-brokered 'reconciliation' agreement. The siege resulted from a flat rejection by the Central Negotiations Committee (CNC)³ of a list of demands delivered by Asad Allah, a newly appointed Russian officer at the time, to (1) surrender light and medium-sized weapons and (2) allow the Syrian military and security forces to search the area and nearby farms. During the tight several-month-long siege, intense clashes between groups of unreconciled rebels and the Syrian military and security forces frequently occurred, representing the deadliest and fiercest armed confrontations southern Syria had witnessed since 2018.

During the offensive there were several truces and negotiations, which quickly became locked in stalemate as the Military and Security Committee of Southern Syria (MSCSS) – a group of high-ranking military and security official⁴ – and the Daraa al-Balad CNC failed to reach a consensus. Two main points of contention remained: first, the MSCSS's demand to establish increasing numbers of security and military outposts in Daraa al-Balad; and second, the displacement of 'reconciliation' rejectionists, including two main unreconciled rebels accused of having ties with Islamic State, Mouayad al-Harfoush and Mohammed al-Masalmeh. The CNC was blamed for facilitating the displacements and therefore lost a great deal of its leverage over the behaviour of unreconciled rebels, who operated as spoilers of potential agreements that involved population relocations.

Russia made a last-minute intervention to end the conflict. On 5 September 2021, it increased its pressure on the CNC and revealed an outright willingness to back the Syrian military offensive if the conflict did not end in a peaceful settlement. Under increasing pressure and a

1 Aron Lund, "Assad Shores Up Control in Syria's Symbolically Important South," *World Politics Review*, 16 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/2XY1ra8>; Armenak Tokmajyan, "How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed into a Regional Powder Keg," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2SbfyCK>

2 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Russia Rethinks the Status Quo in Southern Syria," *Middle East Institute*, 13 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3AAx-6MZ>

3 An aggregation of civilian opposition figures, former rebel leaders and local notables who acted as interlocutors with Russia and regime officials since the conclusion of the 2018 agreement. Two main committees have operated in Daraa governorate – one in Daraa al-Balad and one in Tafas – which also intervened to represent the city's surrounding localities. 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>

4 The MSCSS is led by the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, Major-General Hussam Luqa, and includes the General Commander of the First Corps of the Syrian army, Major-General Mufeed Younis Hasan, and the head of the Military Security Branch, Brigadier Louay al-Ali.

balance of power that continued to favour the regime, the CNC was obliged to accept the deal. The new agreement stipulated (1) a ceasefire, (2) a handover of light and medium-sized arms, (3) 'reconciliation' of the status of wanted individuals, (4) acceptance of the establishment of nine lightly equipped security checkpoints and (5) the CNC allowing regime forces to search the area and check the identity cards of the residents to ensure no strangers are present in Daraa al-Balad. The CNC has reportedly requested the MSCSS to work on the release of detainees and to provide information on missing individuals. Noteworthy, the deal excluded al-Harfoush and al-Masalmeh, who have absconded to an unknown place.

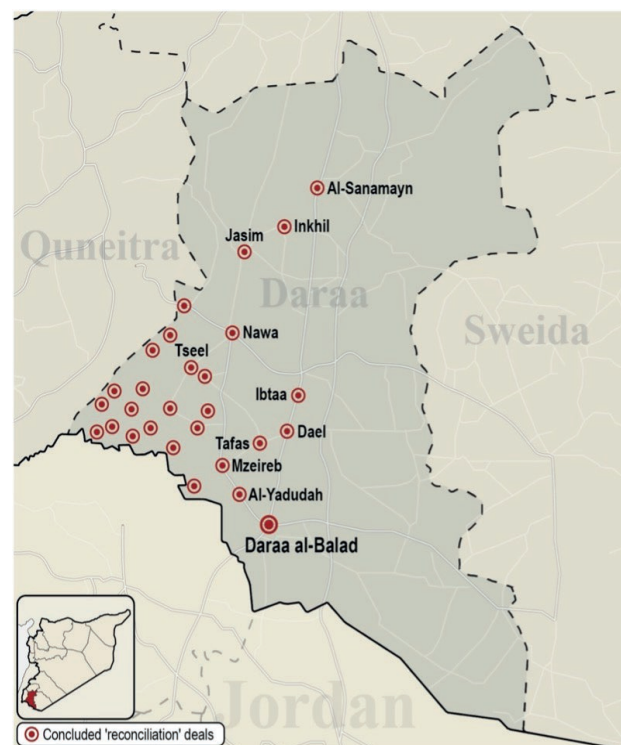
On the next day, the regime opened 'reconciliation' centres in Daraa al-Balad, where hundreds of light and medium-sized weapons were surrendered. In addition, wanted people, including civilians, former rebels, military defectors, evaders and deserters, approached 'reconciliation' centres to embark on a 'reconciliation' process. On 8 September, officers from the Russian Military Police accompanied by members of the Syrian military and security forces wandered into the area and checked the residents' identity cards. The regime ordered the removal of barriers and the re-opening of roads that connect Daraa al-Balad to other parts of the city. On 9 September, the regime lifted the siege, re-opened the police station and established nine lightly armed checkpoints staffed by 20-25 members. Under the supervision of the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade, nearly 38,000 internally displaced people (IDPs), mostly women and children who during the siege had fled the area to other parts of the city and its surrounding farms, began to return to their homes.

The state sought to resume the provision of basic services, not only to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Daraa al-Balad inhabitants but also to convince the populations of other southern localities that the advantages of surrendering outweighed those of resisting. However, macro-economic deterioration, limited resources and damage to infrastructure – estimated by local activists at more than 80 per cent in 2018 and compounded by the recent conflict – hinder notable large-scale improvements in service provision. Following three years of restrictions

on access to equitable service delivery in Daraa al-Balad by the locals, the regime re-opened two bakeries, stationed four mobile clinics to provide health care, started simple repairs of power networks and improved the supply of drinking water.

Rather than a deal limited to resolving a localised conflict, the regime capitalised on Russia's support to replicate its approach and reproduce the Daraa al-Balad agreement so as to deconstruct active rebel networks in the main previously 'reconciled' hamlets. The unrestricted violence of the Syrian military forces in Daraa al-Balad and the promise to restore functioning systems of service delivery to the exhausted local population played pivotal roles in facilitating the conclusion of a series of new agreements in several localities, particularly ones with no reported overt resistance. Agreements between the MSCSS and Russian military officers, on the one hand, and representatives of local communities, be they members of the CNC or local notables, on the other, focused on and consecutively occurred in western Daraa.

Map 1: Concluded 'Reconciliation' Deals, (as of 7 October 2021)



Source: The Author

The process started in al-Yadudah, Mzeireb and Tafas (the major sources of lawlessness, unrest and violent mobilisation since 2018) and moved to include localities in al-Yarmouk Basin in the southwestern corner of the province and then to Nawa, Jasim, al-Sanamayn, and Inkhil in the north-west of the region (Map 1). In all these localities, Russian military police officers and Syrian military and security forces accepted the surrender of light and medium-sized weapons, conducted brief searches of neighbourhoods, established several checkpoints and opened ‘reconciliation’ centres, where hundreds of applications from wanted individuals were submitted.

Simultaneously, the Syrian army deployed contingents of its forces in locations near the border with Jordan. This occurred following a visit by the Syrian Defence Minister, General Ali Ayyoub, to Amman, where he discussed border security and future coordination with the Jordanian Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lieutenant General Youssef al-Huneiti.⁵

2. The Reconfiguration of Local Orders in Southern Syria

The smooth unchallenged entry of the regime and the increasing ‘reconciliation’ turnout in a region renowned for being the epicentre of vital resistance is puzzling. According to many in Daraa, international consensus is what navigated the local dynamics and permitted the regime’s runaway victory. Questions about the performance and credibility of the CNC, both in Daraa al-Balad and western Daraa, are therefore crucial. “People in Daraa should investigate the role played by the [CNC] members during the negotiations. Were they complicit in facilitating a ‘soft surrender’ or just bad at negotiating?” asked a civilian in September. However, for others the recent ‘reconciliation’ agreements are not inclusive and do not reflect the reality on the ground but instead are a mere show that targets external states and aims to demonstrate the regime’s ability to pacify volatile areas. “Media outlets, including ones that claim to be

pro-revolution, are either complicit or have no idea about what is happening on the ground. Hundreds of wanted people have refused to ‘reconcile’ their status. These deals are plays to show that the regime is now controlling the south,” explained a local residing in a town in which a ‘reconciliation’ agreement was recently concluded. Finally, some locals argue that the updated agreements are intended to divert the attention of external actors from the repositioning of contingents of Iranian and Iran-backed forces in the region, including ones that arrived there during the Daraa al-Balad offensive. One local activist residing in a locality near the Syrian-Jordanian border argued in late September that “when you follow the news, you get the feeling that Iranian groups have vanished in southern Syria. It is a matter of time before they reappear in new places and under new covers.”

Putting aside local perceptions, Daraa has reached a point of no return to the order that prevailed prior to June 2021. In so many ways, the Daraa al-Balad crisis and the ensuing 2021 Russian-brokered agreements have implications for the established status quo in southern Syria. Remarkably, the new deal rescinds two essential core articles in the 2018 agreement, namely (1) the right of former rebels to keep their light firearms and (2) no presence of Syrian military and security forces inside the ‘reconciliation’ areas.⁶ Therefore, questions about how the new agreement impacts networks of resistance and redefines local orders need to be addressed

2.1 Daraa al-Balad: The End of Overt Resistance?

Since 2018, Daraa al-Balad, the old part of the provincial capital, had been characterised by tenuous regime control. The locals benefited from semi-autonomy to manage local affairs and to continue to manifest opposition. On many occasions they took to the streets and under the auspices of the CNC demanded the release of detainees, an easing of security measures and an ousting of Iranian and Iran-backed groups from Daraa. The 2021 agreement, however,

5 Reuters, “Syrian Military Chief Makes Rare Visit to Jordan to Discuss Border Security,” 20 September 2021, <https://reut.rs/3zBoG6A>

6 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/2CDpfIK>

allows the Syrian regime to disrupt the semi-autonomous status and increase its degree of penetration in Daraa al-Balad.

The outcome of the Daraa al-Balad conflict has inevitable implications for the CNC. While the entity has been portrayed as an available yet ineffective intermediary actor,⁷ recent developments have revealed infiltration by the MSCSS, displaced active rebels and opposition figures, and a degree of internal fragmentation and rivalry amongst the CNC members. In addition, accusations by many locals and unreconciled rebels of ‘stark betrayal’ and ‘complicity’ have serious consequences for the representation, legitimacy and functions of the entity. “We have suspicions that a few [CNC] members were cooperating with regime officials to accelerate the surrender of Daraa al-Balad. To date, we do not know what the [CNC] members talked about during the negotiations,” a local from Daraa al-Balad explained in September.

Loosening the bonds among the few CNC members and between them and the local population serves the regime to widen its interventions in local affairs, monitor civilian conduct and punish defiance. Given the limited number of checkpoints it can establish, the regime will continue to manoeuvre to bring Daraa al-Balad under firmer security control. The threat to inflict direct violence together with reliance on insiders in the Daraa al-Balad community solves the problem of identifying and deterring rebel agents and spoilers hiding among the local population. This, in turn, disrupts networks of mobilisation, impedes prospective violent and non-violent collective action and ensures a degree of regime control. To this end, the regime may capitalise on the fragmentation of the CNC to, first, exclude from local politics members who have high mobilisation capacity and are ready to exhibit defiance and, second, grant CNC members who signalled shifts in loyalty during the Daraa al-Balad negotiations the responsibility to maintain local security under the aegis of the regime’s military and security apparatuses.

2.2 Western Daraa: The Blackbox of Southern Syria

Tafas city and its surrounding areas are localities in western Daraa which were also included in the 2018 Russian-led negotiations. Like Daraa al-Balad, the area has been represented by a CNC composed of civilian members, ex-opposition figures and former rebel leaders. Remarkably, the latter have gained the upper hand over the civilian members, largely refrained from actively mobilising the masses and engaged in low-level but fuzzy and recurrent communications with the regime military and security officials. “We always hear that they [CNC members] have met with commanders from the Fourth Division and Military Security Branch, but they either deny it or avoid explaining what the meeting was about,” stated a local from Tafas in October.

Since 2018, hundreds of former rebels have remained unreconciled or have signed contracts to join the ranks of the regime’s military and security forces as an ostensible tactic to guarantee security, continue possessing their light weapons and remain in their localities.⁸ In addition, the presence of Iranian forces and Iran-backed proxies in the wider region of western Daraa and their active recruitment of former rebels have further complicated the security landscape and made a clear pattern of control hard to define. The state of lawlessness, the abundance of weapons and the presence of sheer numbers of unreconciled rebels and of Islamic State sleeper cells have made rampant violence a defining characteristic of western Daraa.

The implementation of the new agreements in western Daraa has several crucial implications. First, the rapid and unchallenged surrender of the CNC during the negotiations is alleged to be with an eye to future rewards. The predominant military nature of its members and the close relationship they have with MSCSS officers are likely to grant them a new security role in western Daraa. Second, the surrender of weapons, the establishment of checkpoints in Tafas,

7 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>

8 This occurred after hundreds of integrated former rebels were discharged by Russia from the ranks of the Fifth Corps for refusing to fight alongside the Syrian army outside Daraa. See Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria.”

Mzeireb, al-Yadudah and al-Yarmouk Basin and the reconciliation of the status of hundreds of unreconciled rebels are measures that help the regime to reassert its presence, widen its interventions in local affairs, directly regulate activities and monitor the population.

Third, in the past three years, the behaviour of reconciled rebels who joined the ranks of the Syrian military but remained closer to defiance than loyalty constituted a substantial threat to the regime's control in western Daraa.⁹ The new agreement reduces this threat by implicitly facilitating the deployment of reconciled rebels who joined the Fourth Division to active frontlines where the incentives to defect are too low and their ability to provoke unrest in recovered areas is minimal (e.g. to fight Islamic State in the Badia). In doing so, the regime weakens solidarity bonds and shrinks existing networks of rebellion in western Daraa.

Finally, consistent with the recent agreement is the reported intention of the Fourth Division to withdraw outside Daraa. Such a development, if it happens, will temporarily delimit the presence and activities of Iranian and Iran-backed proxies in Daraa. However, if not already, Tehran will soon find new covers under which it can resume its planned expansion and recruitment of former rebels. Reaffirming its presence and relevance in the game in southern Syria is crucial for the long term, especially as Daraa will accommodate part of the Arab Gas Pipeline project.¹⁰

2.3 Eastern Daraa: The Stronghold of the Eighth Brigade

In Eastern Daraa, the Eighth Brigade, a subdivision of the Russian-backed Fifth Corps, has emerged as the chief armed actor in the city of Busra al-Sham and its surrounding area.¹¹ Established in October 2018 and composed of nearly 1,600 former rebels, the Brigade has been in charge of handling local security affairs and has operated as an effective intermediary actor between regime officials and the local population

to release arrested individuals at regime checkpoints and to convey civilian demands to improve service delivery. As a consequence, the Brigade has been able to maintain a degree of order and establish a relatively secure climate. Beyond its areas of control, the Brigade has also intervened to defuse tensions and broker agreements across Daraa governorate. So far, the Brigade has been able to capitalise on the volatility and chaos in southern Syria and it has become an armed actor with an indispensable military, security and intermediary role.

The implementation of new agreements has largely been concentrated in western Daraa, leaving the eastern region so far untouched. In fact, the Syrian regime and Russia consider eastern Daraa to be more orderly than any other part of the region. This is because a clear pattern of control has been easily defined. Moreover, the Eighth Brigade lacks official recognition by the Syrian Ministry of Defence but enjoys genuine Russian patronage and has active channels to the Syrian regime, through which cooperation or non-cooperation can be discussed and negotiated. This, however, does not mean that its fighters in the eastern region are immune to renewed deals in the foreseeable future.

While Eighth Brigade fighters that operate outside eastern Daraa have just embarked on a 'reconciliation' process, for example in the town of Inkhil in October, there are signs that the new agreements are likely to be implemented in a few localities characterised by vital networks of resistance with a history of attacks on the military and security forces, a presence of Islamic State sleeper cells and localised tribal conflicts in eastern Daraa (Map. 2). These include, for instance, Nahta, Busr al-Harir, al-Hrak and al-Jizeh. If new deals are to be implemented in eastern Daraa, then the Eighth Brigade is likely to demonstrate an atrophied intermediary role. This is not only because of limitations imposed by Russia but also because of the Eighth Brigade's preference to not get involved in agreements that may backfire and embroil its fighters in spirals

9 For example, many reconciled rebels, mostly in the ranks of the Fourth Division, responded to solidarity-based appeals during the Daraa al-Balad conflict and turned their weapons on military checkpoints and captured security and military personnel

10 The Arab Gas Pipeline is a trans-regional gas export pipeline built to carry natural gas from Egypt to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. See Reuters, "Lebanon to Get Egyptian Gas Via Syria in Plan to Ease Crisis," 8 September 2021, <https://reut.rs/3mE7vgD>

11 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>

of tribal violence. The same factors explain the insignificant intermediary role it played in the Daraa al-Balad conflict and account for its large absence from the negotiations and implementations of the local deals in western Daraa.

Map 2: Anticipated 'Reconciliation' Deals in Eastern Daraa



Source: The Author

Lastly, in Busra al-Sham, the headquarters of the Eighth Brigade, pressure to strip the Brigade of its semi-autonomous character and put an end to its loose and nominal affiliation with the Syrian military institution is likely to be renewed. In return for rations, salaries and official recognition by the central authorities, Russia may negotiate with the commander of the Eighth Brigade, Ahmad al-Oda, to renounce the exclusionary structure of the Brigade and accept it being set in the official structure of the Syrian military.¹² An exclusionary structure may be tolerable for the time being if a redeployment of the Eighth Brigade staff from the military institution to a security apparatus in southern Syria occurs. Such a scenario may be imminent and the possibility cannot be dismissed.

Conclusion

The Daraa al-Balad conflict and its wider regional implications have opened a new chapter in the history of southern Syria. Whether they are genuine settlements or not, such easily implemented localised deals are consistent with regional understandings and therefore may spill into the neighbouring volatile provinces of Quneitra and Sweida. Locally, the rapidly accepted agreements across Daraa increase the regime's presence, support its officials' claims of absolute control and convey its ability to stabilise the border region. Particular figures within the CNC such as Daraa al-Balad and Tafas are likely to be rewarded for facilitating expanding regime security control with batches of released detainees and a shared responsibility to manage local security affairs. Against the backdrop of decreasing mobilisation capacity and problems of representation and legitimacy, this could help the CNCs to regain a degree of trust and promote their role in the eyes of many locals.

The sharp decline in the number of violent events in Daraa governorate in September 2021 does not necessarily denote stability. Private conflicts, personal gain, vendettas and the settling of old scores will continue to trigger cycles of violence, albeit at a lower pace. Finally, giving the regime an upper hand and allowing expanding security control were clearly points of convergence for Russia and Iran. This refutes insights that portray Russia and Iran as permanent rivals in southern Syria. Nevertheless, Russia will continue to monitor the presence of Iranian and Iran-backed groups in Syria's south and to use this as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis external actors to advance its regional interests and reaffirm the fundamental role it plays in Syria.

¹² Al-Oda has agreed to integrate former rebels, draft dodgers and military deserters and defectors who hail from Daraa, but he has so far refused to admit soldiers and military officers who come from elsewhere in Syria. See Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria," Syria Transition Challenges Project, Geneva Centre for Security Policy and European University Institute Middle East Directions Programme, Research Project Report, 1 December 2020, October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3n2uDEr>

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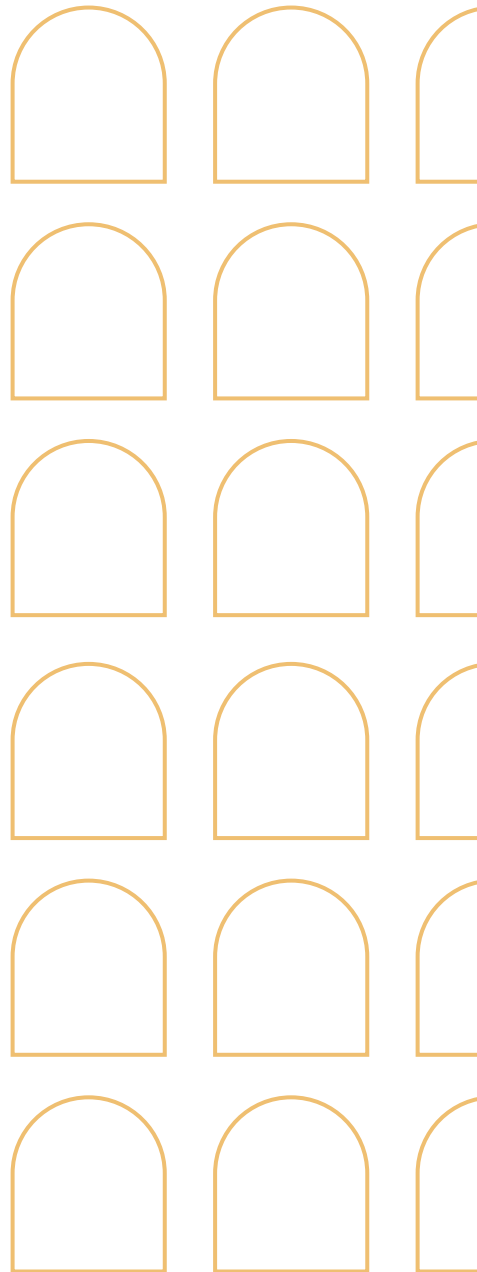
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