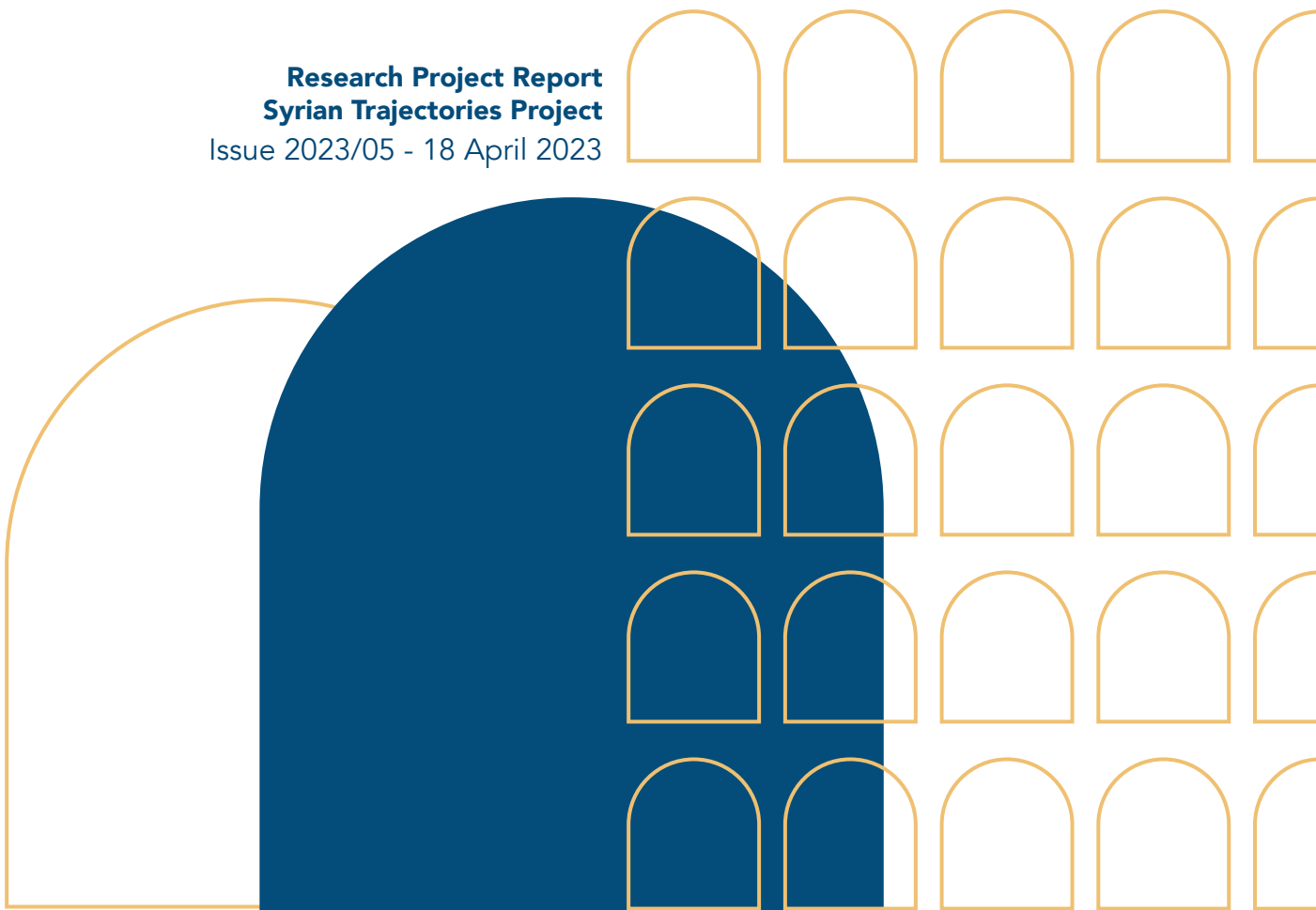


Transformations in the Roles of Intermediaries in Zakyah and Kanaker in Rural Damascus

Mazen Ezzi

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Executive Summary

Since the conclusion of reconciliation agreements in Zakyah city and Kanaker town in Rural Damascus in 2016, members of the reconciliation committees have played the role of intermediaries between the local communities and the Syrian regime. While in Kanaker these intermediaries were civilian actors, including businessmen and local notables, in Zakyah they were loyalists with military or security roles.

In the post-reconciliation era, the intermediaries were able to maintain the status quo and prevent regime forces from having access to Zakyah and Kanaker. This allowed a continuing presence of the armed opposition and made the two localities refuges for military defectors, draft evaders and individuals wanted by the security forces. Despite this, the intermediaries could not achieve substantial progress in resolving contentious issues between the opposition and the regime, such as military conscription and matters concerning detainees and defectors.

Towards the end of 2019, the roles of the intermediaries gradually diminished and were transformed. By enforcing renewed settlements and exerting pressure on the local opposition, the regime managed to achieve two different outcomes. In Kanaker, weakening of the opposition reduced the reconciliation committee's bargaining power, leaving it with the sole function of carrying out the regime's orders. Conversely in Zakyah, the most influential figures in the reconciliation committee began to align themselves with the regime and they eventually became de facto rulers of the locality.

Since early 2020, Russian intervention in Kanaker has prevented the regime from having absolute authority and granted the opposition a form of temporary protection. The intermediary role of the Russians, however, has further marginalised the reconciliation committee. Meanwhile, in the post-reconciliation era there has been no tangible Russian involvement in Zakyah.

Introduction

In late 2016, reconciliation agreements were reached in Zakyah city and Kanaker town which ended a siege imposed by the Syrian regime. The agreements stipulated that in return for the regime's military and security forces not entering inside the localities, the rebels would surrender their weapons and embark on a settlement process or evacuate the area. However, the two agreements were not fully implemented. Violence intermittently erupted with the regime attempting to re-impose sieges and enforce renewed settlements, while the local community continued to resist. Although there were different courses of events in the two localities following the conclusion of the reconciliation agreements, Zakyah and Kanaker gradually arrived at a stage of convergence. Lightly armed former rebels remained relatively active, while a considerable number of military defectors, draft evaders and people opposed to reconciliation continued to shelter inside the localities. Meanwhile, loyalist militias affiliated with the Fourth Division and Military Security were able to infiltrate the two localities.

Local intermediaries played a key role in the reconciliation processes and in reconfiguring the post-reconciliation local situations. Beyond just being a go-between, in this paper an intermediary is defined as a local civil or military actor who conveys demands from the local community or opposition to the regime's security or military authorities – or vice versa in special cases. Two types of intermediaries contributed to the reconciliation processes in the two localities: independent civilian intermediaries in Kanaker and loyalist figures with evolving military or security roles in Zakyah. Both relied on various sources of influence and experienced successes and failures in their mediations. The intermediaries primarily focused on resolving complex security issues, but they did not seem to have a significant impact on service provision and day-to-day life. Given the sensitive nature of these security issues, mediation in the two localities was limited to the members of the reconciliation committees formed in conjunction with the 2016 reconciliation agreements.

Several studies have examined the trajectories of events in reconciliation areas.¹ Some focus on intermediary processes,² others make distinctions between the roles played by civil and military intermediaries in the post-reconciliation period³ and a few compare changes observed in different reconciliation areas.⁴ This paper adds to current understanding of intermediary actors and processes by investigating the local dynamics that influenced the restructuring of local rule and the restored power hierarchy involving the regime and local communities in Rural Damascus. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to comprehend the persistence of civil unrest and the frequent re-emergence of violence in regime-controlled areas.

Drawing primarily on field research, in particular interviews with local notables, leaders of armed groups, journalists and activists, and a large archival source published in recent years, this paper attempts to answer the following questions. Who were the intermediary actors in Kanaker and Zakyah in the post-reconciliation period? What roles did they play, and how effective was their mediation? What factors led to the decline or transformation of this mediation in the two localities? To answer these questions, this paper divides the post-reconciliation period into two stages: a first one, which witnessed the rise of reconciliation intermediaries and which lasted until roughly the end of 2020; and a second, which witnessed their gradual decline and an ongoing transformation of their roles and which has continued until the time of writing.

1 Agnes Favier and Fadi Adleh, "Local Reconciliation Agreements in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, June 2017), <https://bit.ly/3nChEOG>

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

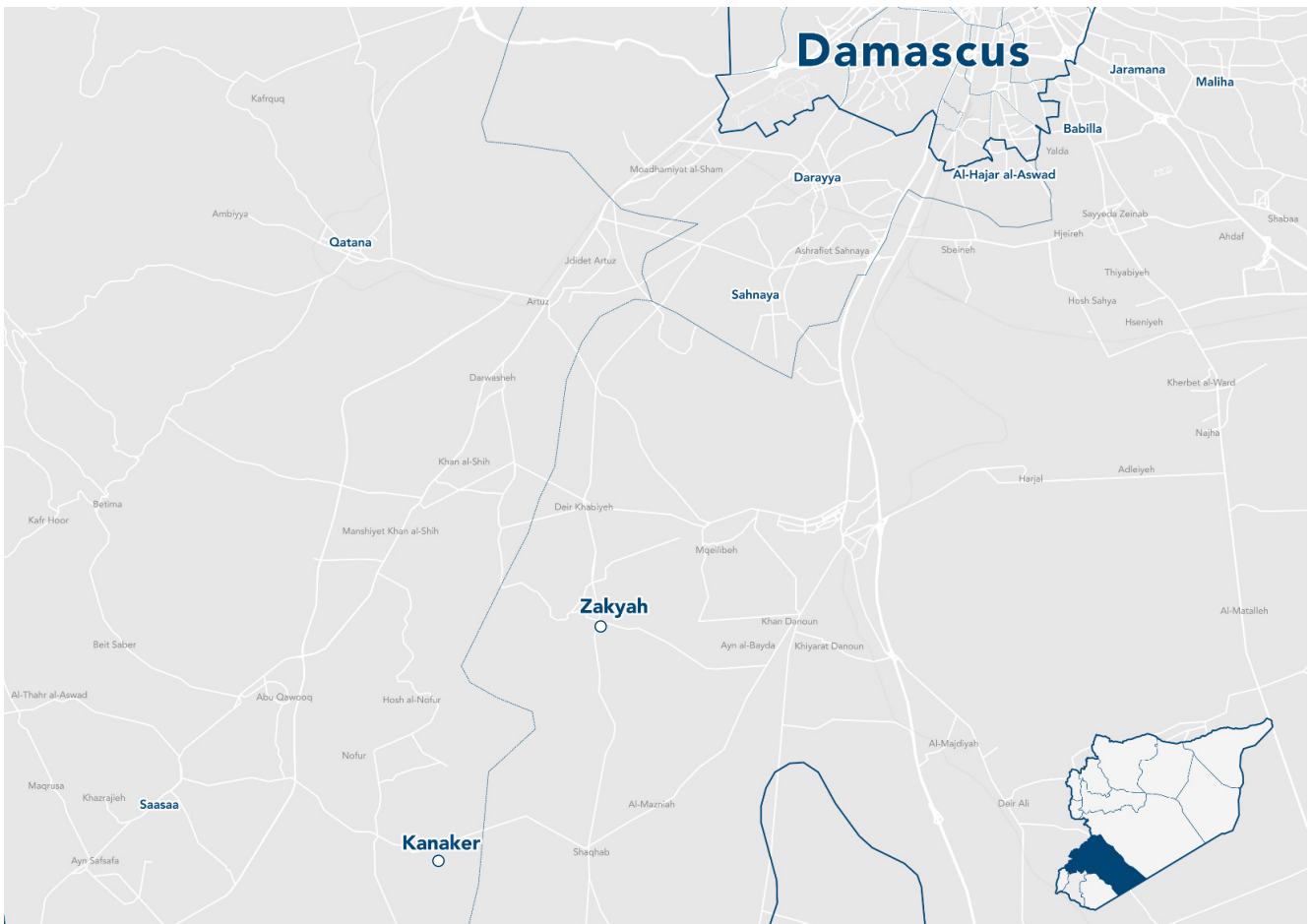
3 Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Governance in Daraa in Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 4 November 2019), <http://bit.ly/38eCzKA>

4 Mazen Ezzi, "Reconciliations in Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?" Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 19 November 2020), <https://bit.ly/3dVPidE>

1. Historical Overview

Kanaker and Zakyah are neighbouring localities located in the southernmost region of Rural Damascus, near the administrative borders of the Daraa and Quneitra governorates (see Map 1). Both localities are part of Western Ghouta and share similar characteristics such as flat terrains and the al-Awaj River, which flows northwest from Mount Hermon. The area is primarily agricultural and features fertile soil suitable for rain-fed cultivation of grain and fruit, and cultivation of vegetables irrigated from shallow wells. The social structures in Zakyah and Kanakera are largely based on traditional family ties and connected to other localities in Rural Damascus, Daraa and Quneitra through marriage relations. The predominant religion is Sunni Islam with a notable Sufi heritage. Similar to the surrounding peasant communities, the level of participation in higher education is low and only a small proportion of the local population have government jobs or military positions. Due to their proximity to the Syrian-Israeli border, since the 1950s numerous military bases have been established around the localities, particularly on the hills overlooking them. The most notable of these bases are occupied by the front-line First, Third and Seventh Divisions.

Map 1: Zakyah and Kanaker



The town of Kanaker is administratively part of the Saasaa subdistrict of the Qatana district of Rural Damascus. Before 2011 it had a population of approximately 18,000 people. Its most prominent and influential families are the Abbas and al-Khatib, which are followed by smaller families like the Hijazi, Kanaan and Zeina. Social conflicts are often informally resolved by a family council composed of notable members of these families. Before the conflict, Kanaker was known for being home to well-known businessmen who were awarded tenders to provide the public sector and the military with services and goods.

Zakyah, on the other hand, is a city and subdistrict that belongs to the Rural Damascus district in the Rural Damascus governorate. Before 2011 its population was around 20,000 people. Unlike Kanaker, Zakyah is composed of small families: the Nouredine, Shaaban, Khalouf, Tohme, Shodab, al-Khatib, al-Fahad, Idris, Khallouf, al-Qadri and al-Nader, each with notable members who are able to address minor disputes by means of social norms. Since the 1990s, many young people from Zakyah have migrated to Lebanon to work in construction jobs. The city is known for the Shamseen and Tuffaha bakeries, both of which are owned by the al-Qadri family. These private bakeries produce a type of bread known locally as 'tourist bread,' which differs from the subsidised bread produced by the government's bakeries.

1.1. Trajectories of Revolution and War

Following the outbreak of the 2011 revolution, Kanaker and Zakyah took different paths. While the majority of Kanaker residents rose up against the regime, Zakyah was divided between dissidents and loyalists. The two prominent families in Kanaker, the al-Khatib and Abbas, expressed strong opposition to the regime and created an environment conducive to large protests as early as March 2011. The Kanaker movement continued until the army stormed the town in July 2011. It then withdrew and erected checkpoints in the outskirts. In early 2012, regime bombardment of neighbouring Darayya and Moadhamiya resulted in a massive displacement to Kanaker, which increased its population to about 35,000. This displacement prompted the opposition to conclude an unannounced agreement with the regime forces aimed at halting the fighting. This spared the regime a new military front and allowed the opposition to maintain its presence and protect the displaced civilians. During this period the al-Furqan Battalions were formed in Kanaker and other areas in Rural Damascus, Quneitra and Daraa.⁵

In late 2012, the al-Furqan Brigade rebel group was formed from the al-Furqan Battalions. It received support from the Military Operations Centre (MOC) in Jordan until 2015.⁶ In the regime's division of military-security zones, Kanaker was designated as a special zone for Military Intelligence Branch 220, also known as the 'Saasaa Branch' or the 'Front Branch,' with its headquarters located in the nearby town of Saasaa. In mid-2015, regime forces were able to isolate Kanaker from Quneitra and Daraa governorates and cut off rebel supply lines and tighten the siege imposed on the town. After a temporary truce, which lasted from late 2015 to mid-2016, the regime laid siege to Kanaker again and increased arrests of its residents at checkpoints. Simultaneously, the regime was operating to put an end to rebel activity in neighbouring hotspots, in particular in Darayya, where an agreement was reached to displace the population, and in Moadhamiyat al-Sham, where reconciliation efforts were initiated.

Zakyah followed a relatively different trajectory. In 2011 the city did not witness a large protest movement and the population was divided between anti-regime protesters and pro-regime marchers, leading to violent incidents breaking out more than once between the two groups. In April 2012 the Adiyat Battalion rebel group was established. In late 2012 it merged with the Companions Brigades in Darayya and Rural Damascus to form the Adiyat Brigade. Despite the formation of other rebel groups in the city, such as the Military Council, the al-Furqan Brigades, Ababil Houran and Ahrar al-Sham, the Adiyat maintained its independence and became the focus of the armed opposition in Zakyah. On the other side, Zakyah was designated as a joint military zone of both the Fourth Division of the Syrian army and Branch 227 of Military Intelligence, known as the 'Region Branch.'

5 The al-Furqan Brigade was led by Muhammad Majid al-Khatib, who has resided outside Syria since the reconciliation. Through marriage, al-Khatib served as a link between the influential Abbas and al-Khatib families in Kanaker.

6 The MOC (Military Operations Centre) was established in 2013 as an external command and coordination headquarters run by the United States, France, Britain, Jordan and some Gulf countries. It oversaw military operations and provided support to opposition factions in Daraa, Quneitra and Rural Damascus. Its role declined after the reconciliation agreement in southern Syria in 2018.

In October 2012, regime forces attempted to storm the city but they were repelled by the rebels. The rebels issued an ultimatum to the local police force to withdraw within two days, following which the city was declared liberated from the regime. The regime set up checkpoints on the roads leading to Zakyah and frequently laid siege to the city. Zakyah also became a destination for displaced people from neighbouring areas, while the armed opposition was concentrated in neighbouring farms in Khan al-Shih. Between 2014 and 2016, the population of Zakyah exceeded 100,000.⁷ In mid-2016, it was completely isolated from its surroundings and subjected to a severe blockade. After rebel groups in Khan al-Shih agreed to evacuate the area, Zakyah was left alone waiting an offer of reconciliation.

1.2. Reconciliation Processes

In November 2016, the regime forces extended an offer of reconciliation to Kanaker through a reconciliation committee. The initiative stipulated a complete surrender of rebel heavy weapons, a return of defectors to military service, settlement of the status of rebels and displacement of reconciliation rejectionists. Rebel groups, led by the al-Furqan Brigade, engaged in direct negotiations with the regime. In December 2016, a temporary agreement was reached which deferred contentious issues related to detainees and defectors to future negotiations. The agreement ensured that regime forces would not enter the town, and it granted defectors and draft evaders an ultimatum to settle their status and return to military service either in a faction based inside the town or in a nearby military unit. The opposition emphasised the importance of addressing the fate of detainees and defectors. On 13 December 2016, regime forces raised the Syrian flag over the official buildings in Kanaker and settled the status of dozens of opposition fighters.⁸ However, in January 2017 only 35 individuals from Kanaker agreed to relocate to the rebel-held areas in Idlib governorate, most of whom were civilians who opposed the agreement. In February 2017 the regime declared Kanaker under its full control.

The reconciliation process in Zakyah took a different path. In mid-2016, preliminary negotiations were held between the regime and opposition factions. In October 2016, a new round of negotiations took place which excluded the Adiyat Brigade.⁹ In December 2016, the newly formed reconciliation committee negotiated an agreement with the regime which stipulated the surrender of rebel heavy weapons, settled the status of wanted individuals and evacuated those wishing to leave to rebel-held areas in Idlib governorate. The agreement also included a deadline for military defectors and draft evaders to re-join the military. By January 2017, 600 people had agreed to reconcile their status, while approximately 500 people, including internally displaced people, had refused to agree and had departed to northern Syria. However, the Adiyat Brigade did not accept the agreement, and around 50 of its fighters stayed in the city without reconciling their status or leaving the area.

1.3. Local Governance and Public Services

After being taken over by the regime, the two localities remained largely besieged and surrounded by regime checkpoints, which hindered the free movement of the population. As a result, the security forces took most of the critical decisions related to the area, including in matters that directly impacted the daily lives of the people, such as the allocation and distribution of fuel and flour. Inside Zakyah and Kanaker, local governance structures composed mainly of regime loyalists, such as local municipal councils and divisions and branches of the ruling Baath Party, were reorganised and resumed activities.

7 Telegram interview with a human rights activist in Zakyah, 15 January 2023.

8 As part of the reconciliation process, individuals were required to undergo a security status settlement, which involved an investigation conducted by officers in various security branches. The individual in question must pledge not to engage in any opposition activity. The investigators then reviewed their file and either rejected the settlement, in which case the person became a wanted individual, or accepted the settlement and issued a settlement card. This card would then allow its owner to move within a specified area for a limited time in order to join either the regime forces to perform compulsory or reserve military service, or one of the loyalist militias. Those who joined these militias were called settlement agents.

9 This round of negotiations was mediated by Kinana Hweija, a pro-regime media personality who sponsored several settlements in western Rural Damascus.

The provision of services showed a slight improvement, with clinics and medical points receiving children's vaccinations and some medicines on a more regular basis. However, the two localities continued to face significant challenges related to a lack of adequate medical care for their substantial populations. Those with severe medical conditions, illnesses and injuries were compelled to seek treatment at hospitals in Damascus or Quneitra, making advanced medical care inaccessible for those wanted by the regime, who would be arrested at checkpoints. Moreover, while the reconciliation agreement stipulated regular entries of international aid, only a few convoys of food and cleaning supplies were allowed in after the agreement, and none after 2018.

On the other hand, the government prioritised securing the agricultural needs of farmers in Kanaker and Zakyah, including fuel, fertilisers and seeds, in order to supply the domestic market with agricultural products such as vegetables. Despite some civil initiatives to secure electricity through alternative energy sources, the two localities continued to suffer from a lack of electricity to power well pumps, which are necessary to obtain clean drinking water and irrigate crops. A drought was exacerbated by frequent power outages caused by fuel scarcity.

2. The Rise of Intermediaries

The end of rebel rule created a void. The local populace sensed a need for community representatives to serve as intermediaries between themselves and the regime. Actors from various backgrounds stepped in to fill the vacuum, forming or joining reconciliation committees in the two localities. While the intermediaries were able to maintain the post-reconciliation status quo and prevent regime forces from accessing Zakyah and Kanaker, they failed to make significant progress in resolving contentious issues such as the fate of detainees and defectors and military conscription. Meanwhile, the regime managed to penetrate both areas using militias affiliated with the Fourth Division and Military Security.

2.1. Profiling Intermediary Actors

The nucleus of the Kanaker reconciliation committee was formed in late 2015 by members residing in the town or who frequently visited it with the aim of mediating between the regime forces and the opposition, culminating in the reconciliation agreement. The committee consisted primarily of senior businessmen with historical ties with public sector institutions and the army such as Omar al-Hafiz, who was known for supplying food to the Syrian army, Ghassan al-Houri, who provided the public sector with grain, and Issam Zeina, a real estate contractor. The committee also included local notables and family leaders, such as Bahjat al-Hafez, who was killed in a car bomb explosion in December 2019, and local civil servants and members of the ruling Baath Party, such as Subhi al-Safadi, former head of the Baath branch, and Ayman Kanaan, the mayor, who returned to the town after the agreement.

Notably, civil servants played a selective intermediary role that benefited loyalists, most of whom descended from modest small families. This mediation focused on facilitating security settlements for civilians deemed 'deceived' by the loyalist media, namely individuals that the opposition lured during its control over the area. The committee also intervened in cases related to mandatory military conscription, such as by assigning recruits to areas near the town and issuing 'administrative deferrals' for high school and university students. Small families in Kanaker tended to seek employment in the municipality and the Baath Party, making them more likely to work with the regime. However, two large families in the town, the al-Khatib and Abbas, remained neutral after the reconciliation and refrained from participating in either the municipal council or the party branch.

By contrast, the role of intermediaries in Zakyah was largely played by former rebel leaders who had settled their status with the regime's security forces. These commanders had significant powers in managing local affairs and communicating with their constituency. For instance, Mohsen and Aziz

Shodab, who worked at the Shamseen bakery before opening a petrol station in Zakyah in 2004, commanded various groups during the rebel rule over the city. After the reconciliation, they joined the Military Intelligence Directorate without forming their own militia. The Shodab brothers became the most prominent members of the Zakyah reconciliation committee, which consisted entirely of loyalist intermediaries, including Radwan Khaled, head of the municipal council in 2013-2017, Amer Khalaf, head of the municipal council before 2012, and loyalist cleric Shaikh Abdullah Tohme.¹⁰

2.2. The Source of Bargaining Power

Intermediaries in Kanaker relied on the presence of former members of the al-Furqan Brigades as a source of power to negotiate contentious issues with the regime.¹¹ While regime forces maintained a presence outside the town, effectively imposing an undeclared siege, the opposition had a flexible organisational structure led by a central committee which included former leaders of the al-Furqan Brigades. The reconciliation committee acted as an intermediary between the central committee and the Saasaa Branch. In critical moments the opposition exhibited its power by mobilising the population and organising protests, sit-ins, roadblocks, leaflets and graffiti. Occasionally, the opposition used violence and targeted checkpoints while avoiding causing casualties. In November 2019, for example, the Saasaa Police Department summoned and arrested Shaikh Salah, a teacher and former Sharia adviser of the al-Furqan Brigades, on the basis of a lawsuit.¹² Since they could not reach Saasaa, a group of al-Furqan Brigade fighters surrounded the police station in Kanaker, firing indiscriminately and threatening to storm it. The reconciliation committee intervened to de-escalate the situation and pledged to help release Salah. Subsequently, the committee contacted the Saasaa branch and succeeded in securing his release.¹³

In Zakyah, a similar situation produced different results. Instead of using the armed opposition to gain leverage over the regime, intermediaries chose to align with the regime and promote their own interests. The Shodab brothers used the insecurity and targeted killings carried out by local militias affiliated with the Fourth Division¹⁴ as a way to put pressure on the Adiyat Brigade and blame its members for the deteriorating security situation. When tensions flared up between the militias and the Adiyat Brigade, the Shodab brothers acted as biased intermediaries. Often, their efforts contributed to achieving the regime's goals, including weapon surrenders and repeated settlements. With every concession made by the Adiyat Brigade the Shidab brothers consolidated their control in the city and enriched themselves.

In June 2018, an assassination attempt targeted Nazir Shaaban, an Adiyat commander, while he was passing near a Fourth Division checkpoint in the vicinity of Zakyah. Shaaban was wounded in the attack and subsequently arrested. This led to a retaliatory response by the Adiyat Brigade, which captured two regime soldiers at a checkpoint. This prompted the regime forces to lay a new siege on Zakyah and arrest hundreds of civilians at checkpoints. The regime demanded the release of the two soldiers by the Adiyat Brigade as a condition for lifting the siege and releasing the detainees. Members of the Adiyat Brigade were deployed in the city with full arms for the first time since the reconciliation. The Shodab brothers intervened and brokered a truce between the two parties, which involved the release of the two soldiers in exchange for the Fourth Division releasing Shaaban and civilian detainees. The agreement also included a surrender of 12 rifles or payment of their value. Shortly afterwards it became apparent that the Shodab brothers were exploiting security incidents in the city as a means of generating profit.¹⁵

10 Shaikh Tohme died from COVID-19 in November 2020.

11 In addition, a significant number of defectors, draft evaders and others who were wanted by the security forces did not accept the reconciliation.

12 During the period of opposition control the sheikh was accused of issuing a fatwa authorising the killing of members of the regime's forces.

13 Sawt al-Asimah, "After the Arrest of One of its Shaikhs the People of Kanaker Surround the Town's Police Station and Threaten a Storm" (in Arabic), Facebook, 9 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/42bOS7n>

14 These militias were led by two settlement figures, Muawiya Tohme and Yasser al-Fahad.

15 Testimony from a commander in the Adiyat Brigade obtained by the author in June 2019.

2.3. Successes and Failures of Intermediaries

Apart from preventing the collapse of the reconciliation agreement, which involved the opposition retaining a presence in Kanaker and Zakyah while preventing the regime from gaining a foothold, intermediaries in the two localities were unable to make any headway in resolving unresolved security and military matters between the opposition and the regime.

In Kanaker, the 2016 reconciliation agreement included a regime promise to permit military defectors to remain in the town and take responsibility for maintaining local security. The opposition viewed this as an important gain and therefore accepted the reconciliation agreement. The total number of defectors in Kanaker was about 200, including eight officers, most of whom defected from the military in 2011. For the regime, the priority was to reintegrate defectors into their military units to utilise the skills and experience of these professional fighters and to prevent concentrations of them. Whenever security tension flared up, the reconciliation committee attempted to negotiate with the regime regarding the issue of defectors. These discussions, however, failed to yield any meaningful progress.

For its part, the regime's primary security measure in Kanaker was to impose compulsory conscription on young people, both to counteract opposition and to recruit new soldiers. Regime forces imposed conscription by arresting wanted men for military service at checkpoints around the town. The intermediaries were unsuccessful in their attempts to stop military conscription of those who underwent status settlement and were granted exceptions, including high school and university students.¹⁶ Likewise, the intermediaries were unable to negotiate the release of around 300 detainees from Kanaker.¹⁷ So far, the detainees who have been released due to the efforts of intermediaries are only those who were detained after the reconciliation agreement.

In Zakyah, the Shodab brothers helped the regime overturn the terms related to military defectors, draft evaders and detainees. In fact, the reconciliation committee acted as an intermediary with the security and military forces on specific arrangements, such as settling the status of wanted individuals, postponing military service for students and giving members of local militias security badges. On certain occasions, intermediaries intervened to release detainees from the Military Intelligence Directorate. As security raids were very rare due to the presence of opposition fighters in Zakyah, arrests of wanted dissidents or draft evaders only occurred at the checkpoints outside the city. Despite their attempts to weaken the opposition, intermediaries helped maintain the reconciliation agreement and prevented regime forces from entering the city. As a result, intermediaries, particularly the Shodab brothers, gained exclusive control over local affairs.

To sum up, the rise of intermediaries in Kanaker and Zakyah between 2016 and 2019 could be viewed as primarily driven by the need of local communities to fill the void during the transitional phase between the end of rebel rule and the partial restoration of the regime's authority. While the intermediaries in Kanaker relied on the presence of lightly armed former rebels to serve the local community, the intermediaries in Zakyah used their influence to pressurise the opposition to serve the regime and achieve personal gains. In both cases, the primary achievement during this period was maintenance of the post-reconciliation status quo.

16 Those who had undergone a security settlement were granted a six-month grace period before being required to join either the compulsory or reserve military. High school and university students were granted 'administrative deferrals' for one year.

17 WhatsApp interview with a France-based human rights source, 7 December 2022.

3. The Decline and Transformation of the Role of Intermediaries

Particularly after the 2018 reconciliation agreement in Daraa governorate, the fragile stability in southern Syria brought about significant changes in Kanaker and Zakyah. Starting from late 2019, the role of intermediaries, especially the reconciliation committees, began to wane. In Kanaker, the diminishing influence of intermediaries was primarily due to the regime's attrition policy against local communities, which was aimed at exerting pressure on former rebels. Meanwhile in Zakyah, the intermediaries became increasingly aligned with the regime's security apparatus, further eroding their neutrality.

3.1. Repeating Settlements

Enforcing new settlements was a tactic that the regime resorted to whenever tensions escalated in the area. The regime's security services sought to force the opposition to make new concessions, such as exposing its networks and surrendering its weapons. Moreover, repeated settlements were a main factor that exhausted the local population, particularly adult males, who repeatedly underwent security interrogations. In Kanaker, the reconciliation committee lost much of its credibility among the opposition, which viewed it as a mere enforcer of the regime's directives. Meanwhile in Zakyah, the intermediaries turned into an authoritarian force exerting control over the local population.

In September 2020, security tensions erupted over the arrest of three women from Kanaker at an Air Force Intelligence checkpoint outside the town, which led to protests and armed confrontations. As an officer from the Saasaa Branch was injured, the town was subjected to a new siege.¹⁸ Following arduous negotiations led by the reconciliation committee, military and security patrols entered Kanaker for the first time and searched 45 homes for wanted individuals.¹⁹ The reconciliation committee brokered an agreement between the central committee, the Saasaa Branch and the Seventh Division to put an end to the protests and conduct a collective settlement process for all the locals. In exchange, the detained women were released and the siege was lifted. The collective settlement process, which began on 10 October, required military defectors and draft evaders to join the regime's First Brigade in southern Syria. The settlement lasted 8 days and involved around a thousand young men, including 90 military defectors.²⁰

In April 2022, the Saasaa Branch again imposed a settlement on wanted individuals from Kanaker. Without trying to negotiate with the Branch, the reconciliation committee compiled a list of around 400 wanted young men whose settlements were implemented in May 2022 as part of Amnesty Decree No. 7 of 2022.²¹ The draft evaders were granted six months, and the defectors five days, to join their military units. Repeated settlements were not always implemented fully or immediately, as new ultimatums and delays made settlements a prolonged process, which was intended to be burdensome. Many local residents believed that repeated settlements diminished the reconciliation committee's intermediary role, turning it into a tool for implementing the security forces' orders.

18 Sawt al-Asimah, "Rural Damascus: Regime Breaks Up Kanaker Protests with Heavy Weapons, Unknown Persons Target a Brigadier General at Checkpoint" (in Arabic), Facebook, 22 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3EKLNB5>

19 Sawt al-Asimah, "After Repeated Threats... Regime's Army in Kanaker, and Intelligence Launch Massive Inspection Campaign" (in Arabic), Facebook, 3 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3L6Ugmv>

20 Sawt al-Asimah, "Security Settlement Process Begins in Kanaker, Regime's Intelligence Meets with Population" (in Arabic), Facebook, 12 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3YfBlSu>

21 The judge granted a general amnesty for terrorist crimes committed before 30 April 2022. Peter Booth, "Manipulating National Shock: The Assad Regime's Wartime Instrumentalisation of Presidential Amnesty," Policy Brief, (Florence: European University Institute, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, October 2021), <https://bit.ly/3UCtPHZ>

In Zakyah, similar procedures were repeatedly imposed, with the Shodab brothers taking advantage to consolidate their power and maintain their control. In January 2022, an agreement was reached with the Regional Branch to reconcile the status of wanted individuals. The agreement required military defectors to re-join their military units, while military evaders had three months to comply. During the process, Mohsen Shodab got into a heated argument with a young man who claimed that the reconciliation committee had left out clauses related to the release of detainees in the new agreement. The argument soon escalated into armed clashes, and Aziz Shodab ended up shooting and injuring the young man. Doctors were prevented from providing medical care to the injured man before the opposition responded to an order to surrender 30 rifles or pay their value.²² The incident demonstrated that Zakyah's influential intermediaries had become an integral part of the regime's security grip and had lost any semblance of neutrality or ability to mediate effectively. Official statements suggest that over 1,400 young men had participated in the settlement process.²³

3.2. Exhaustion of the Opposition

In both Kanaker and Zakyah, the regime implemented a policy of attrition, gradually weakening the opposition's bargaining power by enforcing mandatory military service, pursuing defectors and arresting those who opposed the reconciliation process. A state of undeclared siege turned both localities into large prisons, draining the capacity of communities to resist and exacerbating their already dire living conditions. The pressures and hardships in the two localities caused many who rejected reconciliation to leave Syria illegally, especially during the last two years. Consequently, the declining role of the opposition led to a similar decline in the role of the intermediaries, who lost an important source of influence.

In April 2020, Syrian state television broadcast interviews with detainees from Kanaker, who confessed to planting explosive devices and carrying out bombings in Damascus in 2019. Some interviewees admitted to having ties with members of the al-Furqan Brigades.²⁴ The interviews indicated that the regime's tolerance of the presence of the al-Furqan Brigades in Kanaker and their ability to operate had come to an end. Mohammad Majed Al-Khatib, the commander of the al-Furqan Brigades, denied these accusations on his personal Facebook page, adding that four of the bombings for which the interviewees assumed responsibility occurred after they had been arrested.²⁵

Following the broadcast, the head of the Saasaa Branch summoned the reconciliation committee and urged them to preserve stability, warning that if they failed the area's file could be withdrawn and handed over to another branch. To end security tensions, he proposed two options: the wanted persons could either leave Syria voluntarily or they would be displaced to opposition-held areas in north-western Syria.²⁶ The security approach to the opposition in Kanaker was one of maximum pressure, with the aim of forcing the opposition to either surrender completely or evacuate the town. This pressure was evident from the lists issued by various security branches after 2020, which included hundreds of individuals who were wanted and whose status settlements were refused.

22 Sawt al-Asimah, "Quarrel, Shooting and Injury... What Happened in the Zakyah Settlement Centre?" (in Arabic), Facebook, 23 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3kDpsia>

23 SANA, "After Settling Their Status... End of the Settlement Process in al-Kiswah Area – Video" (in Arabic), 3 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3J8kfsk>

24 SANA, "Confessions of Terrorists: We Hired a Person Affiliated with the So-Called al-Furqan Brigade and Blew Up Cars in Damascus and its Countryside in Exchange for Money" (in Arabic), 11 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3y4Z3Np>

25 Sawt al-Asimah, "Regime's Media Broadcasts Confessions of Young Men Responsible for Bombings in Damascus and its Countryside" (in Arabic), Facebook, 12 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3SEMMZA>

26 Ahmed al-Ibrahim, "The Syrian Regime Threatens Residents of a Town Near Damascus with Displacement" (in Arabic), *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 19 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IFLpFf>

In Zakyah, the security forces relied on creating chaos and staging assassinations to weaken the opposition, often by recruiting fighters who had gone through the settlement process in sleeper cells or as loyal local fighters. These recruits were given special privileges and ordered to carry out attacks and bombings. The intermediaries, meanwhile, shifted the blame to the opposition and stoked animosity against them among the local population. The presence of the Adiyat Brigade commander Anas Idris was emphasised and exploited. Between April and August 2019, Idris was targeted in two assassination attempts, and he was seriously injured in the second. Doctors in the area were afraid to treat him. Reconciliation committee member Mohsen Shodab offered to transfer him to a hospital in Damascus. In exchange, Shodab required the Adiyat Brigade fighters to settle their security status and surrender their weapons, and this is what eventually happened.²⁷

3.3. Negotiations with Russia

In both Kanaker and Zakyah, the involvement of Russia appeared late and it further weakened the reconciliation committees. In Kanaker, Russian officials preferred to meet the opposition directly and act as intermediaries between them and the regime. Although they could not fulfil any civilian demands, they granted the opposition protection and recognition, thus deterring the regime from attempting to uproot it. In Zakyah, however, Russia's interests were limited to recruiting post-settlement fighters for the Wagner private military company to fight in Libya.

In late 2019, amid rising tensions in Kanaker, a Russian delegation visited the town²⁸ and met members of the reconciliation committee, and also several local notables and members of the opposition's central committee. The latter stressed the importance of Russian involvement in releasing detainees, and in exchange promised that they would be willing to meet again.²⁹ Less than a month after the initial meeting, a Russian military delegation revisited Kanaker and met local notables and central committee members. Notably, they excluded the reconciliation committee after suspecting that one of its members had passed on minutes of previous meetings to the Saasaa Branch.³⁰ Russian delegates held several meetings with local notables, central committee representatives and reconciliation committee members. Discussions focused on calming tensions and releasing detainees. In April 2021, Saasaa Branch officers attended the last meeting. Therefore, the Russian involvement resulted in a significant breakthrough by facilitating direct negotiations between the opposition and the regime, the first of its kind since 2016. However, this came at the expense of marginalising the reconciliation committee.³¹

On the other hand, Russia was not involved in negotiations in Zakyah, where the opposition had been in decline since 2019 and the Shodab brothers along with loyalist militias had become the de facto authority. There was no direct involvement by Russia. However, the Russians did play a part in undermining the authority of Aziz Shodab, who had breached an agreement in April 2020 to recruit 1,000 post-settlement fighters from Rural Damascus to join Khalifa Haftar's Russian-backed forces in Libya.³²

27 Telegram interview with a Turkey-based human rights activist from Zakyah, 18 December 2022.

28 Suleiman al-Matar, "Russia's Eye on Rural Damascus" (in Arabic), *Al-7al*, 21 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3KLNWwR>

29 Sawt al-Asimah, "After Days of Security Tension, Russian Delegation Visits Kanaker in Western Damascus" (in Arabic), Facebook, 19 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/3SDGrO5>

30 Sawt al-Asimah, "Conflict of Loyalty in Kanaker... Military Security Meets with Population, and Russian Delegation Visits Town" (in Arabic), Facebook, 25 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IM5FVM>

31 Telegram interview with an Iraq-based journalist from Kanaker, 2 January 2023.

32 Aziz Shodab misled the fighters from Zakyah by informing them that their mission was to protect Russian installations and oil fields rather than engage in combat. On arriving at the recruitment centre for Wagner forces in Homs and realising the true nature of their combat mission in Libya, 15 fighters asked to cancel their contracts. As a result, Russia dismissed Aziz Shodab from his role with Wagner Group forces to enlist fighters from the Kisweh area. Sawt al-Asimah, "Hours Into Their Journey... Group of Zakyah's Sons Cancel Fighting Contracts in Libya" (in Arabic), Facebook, 28 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3KLPmen>

3.4. The Fourth Division and the Rise of New Actors

In both localities, conflicts over power and control between the regime's dominant forces and local groups took place. This left a direct impact on the intermediaries, leading to their marginalisation in Kanaker and their alignment with the regime in Zakyah. In Kanaker the reconciliation committee faced a series of setbacks, including the issuance of arrest warrants by the Military Security for its leader Issam Zeina and one of its members in October 2021. He was charged with smuggling wanted individuals and draft evaders out of the area and having contact with the opposition.³³ In an effort to balance the power dynamic with the Saasaa Branch, the reconciliation committee met officers from the Fourth Division in February 2022 to discuss a new settlement process in Kanaker that would not include forced displacement. However, after that meeting the Saasaa Branch required the reconciliation committee to surrender an opposition weapons warehouse and displace young men from Kanaker as part of a new settlement plan. The head of the Saasaa Branch viewed the meeting between the reconciliation committee and the Fourth Division as a challenge to his authority over the area. He accused the reconciliation committee of covering up wanted individuals and helping them move around and carry out attacks, and threatened them with arrest should they pass through the Branch's checkpoints.³⁴

In Zakyah, the power struggle was different. The Military Security's control of the city through the Shodab brothers led competitors to seek support from the Fourth Division. Therefore, competition over Zakyah was limited to loyalist military forces, especially after the intermediaries were weakened and the opposition completely declined. In late 2022, the Fourth Division accepted a proposal by a settlement leader, Mahmoud Abdul-Mawla Toume, to form and fund an armed group affiliated with the Fourth Division.³⁵ Toume's generous offer was driven by a personal dispute with the Shodab brothers over influence in the city. Toume had contested the last local administration election in September 2022 for membership of the Rural Damascus Governorate Council, but lost to Iyad Muhammad Khair al-Nader, who was supported by the Shodab brothers.³⁶ A quarrel and physical altercation broke out between the candidates' representatives at the polling station during a vote-buying competition.³⁷ The situation further escalated into several armed clashes, and Aziz Shodab was injured in October 2022.

Conclusion

Although regime forces did not enter Zakyah and Kanaker, the local communities there faced extreme attrition due to chaos, siege and repeated settlement processes. The opposition had lost much of its ability to protect the local population, and the regime continued to exert pressure regarding military draft evaders, defectors and wanted individuals. In this state of exhaustion, the role of the intermediaries was reduced for two reasons. In Kanaker, the intermediaries lost their sources of influence, while in Zakyah, they abandoned their role due to their alignment with the regime and their loss of neutrality.

33 Sawt al-Asima, "Rural Damascus: Arrest Warrants Against Head of Reconciliation Committee and Another Members in Kanaker" (in Arabic), Facebook, 6 October 2021, <https://bit.ly/41HMKV0>

34 Sawt al-Asimah, "Regime Threatens to Bomb Kanaker and Force Displacement Back to the Table Again" (in Arabic), Facebook, 3 March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3IKnxQQ>

35 In December 2021, the Fourth Division withdrew from some sites around Zakyah as part of a redeployment in southern Syria. The Military Security took control of these sites. In April 2022, a Fourth Division communication banning its officers and members from entering Zakyah was leaked, citing possible "terrorist" attacks. It appears that the leak was part of the ongoing power struggle between the region's security and military forces. Al-Modon, "Damascus: The Fourth Division Prevents Entry of Members to Zakyah" (in Arabic), 30 April 2022, <https://bit.ly/3mieEXk>

36 Ziad Awad, "The 2022 Syrian Local Elections: A Leadership Rooted in Regime Networks," Research Project Report, (Florence, Italy: "Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria," European University Institute, 9 January 2023), <https://bit.ly/3KhUuWI>

37 Sawt al-Asima, "Zakyah: Bazaar of Votes Ends in Fistfight During Local Elections" (in Arabic), Facebook, 19 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3y2OeeT>

This diminishing role of intermediaries means that significant challenges could arise, including the weakening of communication channels between the regime and communities. This, in turn, increases the risk of renewed cycles of violence. Additionally, the arbitrary proliferation of arms, the presence of loyalist militias and the decline of the opposition leave local communities with little means of protection. Currently the only possible form of mediation now is the simplest one: inter-familial mediation that tackles individual local issues.

This state of exhaustion and the lack of effective intermediaries with the regime's security forces put the most vulnerable groups at increased risk. As restrictions on defectors, draft evaders and wanted individuals have tightened, displacements from the two localities have increased during the past few years, mostly through illegal means and outside Syria.

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