

TERRITORIAL  
FRAGMENTATION,  
VIOLENCE, AND  
LOCAL GOVERNANCE  
IN SYRIA'S  
DARAA GOVERNORATE

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July 2024

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## Executive Summary

In June 2018, the Syrian regime, backed by Russia and Iran, launched a military offensive that aimed at recapturing southern Syria. By August 2018, rebels in Daraa Governorate were pushed to surrender under a patchwork strategy, including the regime's use of armed force and Russian-led negotiations between state representatives and opposition figures. Although parallel yet disjointed processes have quelled an almost eight-year insurrection, this approach has resulted in inconsistent regime authority across the region and facilitated the emergence of new power brokers who exercised significant influence in parts of the south.

This research paper investigates the complex landscape of post-war Daraa Governorate in southern Syria, where territorial fragmentation, geopolitical manoeuvres, resurgence of violence, and community resilience shape its current state. This paper examines the main drivers of violence in post-war Daraa Governorate including regime small-scale military offensives, vigilante operations, local factional rivalries, tribal conflicts, and widespread criminal activities, which collectively contribute to heightened insecurity and volatility.

In the post-war situation, the local population continues to endure deteriorating service provision. This research paper highlights the persistent challenges in the delivery of public goods, exacerbated by economic constraints and a depleted workforce. It explores the strategies devised by the local population to provide essential services, including appealing to both traditional and new power brokers and launching small-scale grassroots initiatives. It illustrates how economic deterioration and dire security conditions continue to drive migration trends, emphasizing the crucial role of remittances and cross-border networks in sustaining livelihoods.

## Introduction

In July 2018, with the help of Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime recaptured the country's south, where the uprising had been born seven years prior and descended into a protracted civil war. To mitigate the danger of regional escalation in an area that sits at the intersection of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Jordan, and which is subject to intense geopolitical turbulence thereof, Russia forged a relatively lenient approach of counterinsurgency. By facilitating and mediating reconciliation agreements, Russia enabled the regime to reclaim the southern territories. However, the regime's control remained limited and contested in the aftermath of war, with new power brokers exercising varying degrees of control in parts of southern Syria. This is a by-product of the Russian-mediated reconciliation agreements, which enabled former rebels to keep their light weapons and placed restrictions on the presence and access of the military and security services to some pockets in the south. The fragmented landscape that followed was marked by resurgence of violence, with frequent assassinations and kidnappings targeting individuals from all sides.

Given the geostrategic significance of the region, southern Syria remains a site for numerous actors vying for influence and control. As a mediator and a guarantor of the 2018 reconciliation agreement, Russia operated to prevent expanded control by the regime and maintain the *status quo* in the region. However, Russia's war on Ukraine, which started in 2022, has forced Moscow to redirect its attention and resources, resulting in a waning of its influence in the southern region. Despite the limitations imposed on its authority, the Syrian regime remained a significant actor, periodically launching small-scale military escalations to shore up its security control. This strategic manoeuvring has been supported by Iran, which aims to expand its influence in the region despite the widespread opposition from the local populace and the Israeli airstrikes aimed at neutralizing border threats. Jordan, too, opposes the presence of Iranian-linked forces in the border region. Though its influence over events in southern Syria remained relatively limited, Jordan continues to ramp up its military operations to secure its border and curb smuggling of drugs and weapons into its territories.

The volatility characterising post-war situation of Daraa Governorate serves as the impetus for this research paper, which aims to answer the following main research questions: (1) What explains territorial fragmentation that defines post-war Daraa Governorate?; (2) Who are the new power brokers in the region, and what roles do they play in their respective communities?; (3) What are the main causes of violence in post-war Daraa Governorate?; (4) Against the backdrop of deteriorating local governance, what coping mechanisms have local communities adopted to improve their living conditions?

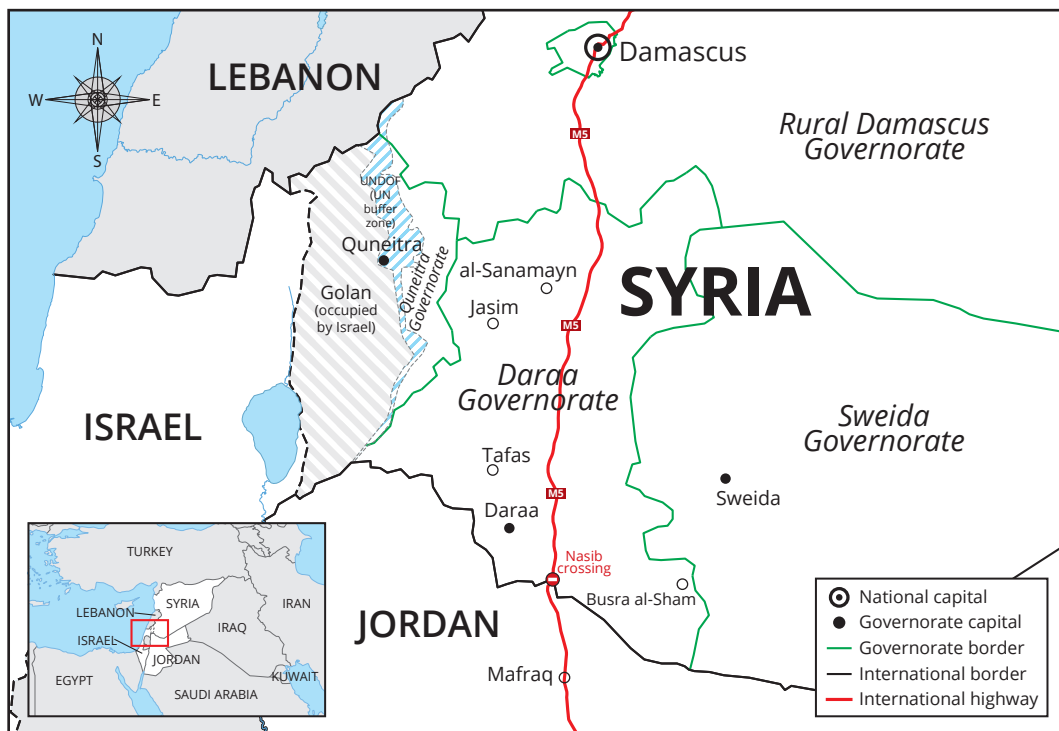
Empirically, this research paper draws on original data collected in multiple waves of fieldwork conducted between July 2018 and May 2024 using different methods. This includes semi-structured interviews conducted with clan shaykhs, former rebel leaders, former combatants, and ordinary civilians, as well as rare access to a private archive of unpublished documents and footage produced by state and non-state actors. It utilises private datasets on patterns of violence as well as on local armed factions that emerged and operated in the region in the aftermath of the war. This research paper used data obtained from participants who gave informed consent, on condition of robust anonymization. Given the volatile situation in southern Syria at the time of writing, this research paper refrains from divulging sensitive and confidential evidence that could trigger or exacerbate dormant or continuing local conflicts and heighten the vulnerability of populations caught up in the precarious security climate of southern Syria.



## 1. The War's Trajectory and Regime Return to Southern Syria

Daraa Governorate is located in south-western Syria, covering an area of 3,730 square kilometres. Commonly referred to as 'Hauran' by its inhabitants, Daraa is a flat area of fields and plains that abuts the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, Jordan, and Sweida Governorate (see Map1). In 2011, the population of the governorate reached 1,126,000 inhabitants, or 4.6% of Syria's total population.<sup>1</sup> Although the majority of the inhabitants are cultivators, circular migration to Lebanon and Jordan organised by extended social networks was historically significant in the Daraa Governorate.<sup>2</sup> Religiously conservative, the region is predominantly Sunni Muslim.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is also home to a small number of Shia and Christian families. The peripheral region is characterised by a strong clan-based social structure, essentially comprised of networks based on extended family ties. The largest clans of the Daraa Governorate are al-Hariri and az-Zu'bi.<sup>4</sup> There are other clans that appear to collectively constitute the majority of Dara's population, such as Abu Zeid, al-Masalmeh, al-Muqdad, and al-Mahameed. The leading members of the clan are referred to as 'shaykhs' (sing. shaykh). In Daraa Governorate, a 'shaykh' is not necessarily a leader in the exact sense of the word; he is, rather, an elder or a notable (referred to as *wajeh*, plural. *wujahaa*), who qualifies for this title based on wisdom, seniority, and most importantly, the ability to resolve disputes. Despite the social authority they wield, their status and legitimate power is largely anchored in public consent. As such, the loss of public support and a deviation from accepted social norms carry the potential to undermine a shaykh's authority and legitimacy.<sup>5</sup>

Map 1: Daraa Governorate in Southern Syria



1. Central Bureau of Statistics, Syrian Population Distribution by Sex & Governorate According to Civil Registration Record in 01/01/2011.
2. Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, "Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (July 1, 2012): 139–59.
3. Ibid.
4. On this, see: Hanna Abi Rushd, *Hawran Al-Damiya*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Zaidan Public Library, 1926). This is corroborated by a series of interviews with a number of shaykhs from Daraa in 2016-2017.
5. Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Tribalocracy: Tribal Wartime Social Order and Its Transformations in Southern Syria", *International Studies Quarterly*, (Forthcoming).

Once regarded as a base of the Syrian Ba'ath Party,<sup>6</sup> in March 2011 protests erupted in Daraa Governorate against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The catalyst for these protests was the security forces' arrest, detention, and mistreatment of a group of children accused of inscribing anti-regime slogans on walls.<sup>7</sup> This incident ignited the first major protest on 18 March in Daraa city, where security forces used excessive force and repression against protesters, resulting to the first casualties of the uprising.<sup>8</sup> As the regime's violent crackdown on protesters persisted, the civil resistance movement gradually evolved into an organized armed rebellion. Since at least mid-2013, states opposed to the Syrian regime established a single covert channel known as the Military Operations Command (MOC), headquartered in Amman, Jordan.<sup>9</sup> By providing funding and material support, the MOC enabled rebel groups to shift from hit-and-run tactics against regime forces to gaining and holding territory.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, a series of significant setbacks have inflicted severe damage on the Syrian army, leaving the remaining government forces in a precarious state. In April 2015, rebel groups seized control of the Nasib-Jabir border crossing with Jordan,<sup>11</sup> signalling a further erosion of the regime's border control.

By 2015, the regime's territorial control became limited to a narrow strip of land along the vital M5 highway, which connects Damascus with Daraa city, effectively dividing the governorate into eastern and western halves. Daraa city, the provincial capital, mirrored this division, with the regime retaining control over Daraa al-Mahatta in the northern portion, while Daraa al-Balad in the south fell under rebel control.<sup>12</sup> That year saw the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) in southern Syria. Once affiliated with the MOC, the *Liwa Shuhadaa al-Yarmouk* (al-Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade) that operated in the al-Yarmouk Basin, located in the far western reaches of the Daraa Governorate, underwent an ideological and structural change and became an IS affiliate in Syria's south.<sup>13</sup> The clashes between the Southern Front and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (al-Nusra Front) on one side,<sup>14</sup> *Liwa Shuhadaa al-Yarmouk* on the other,<sup>15</sup> have significantly diverted rebel manpower away from confronting the regime.

The Russian direct military intervention in September 2015 has influenced the trajectory of the war in the Daraa Governorate. In October, Jordan agreed with Russia to coordinate military action and to contain the crisis in Syria.<sup>16</sup> In 2017, the landscape began to undergo a substantial change in 2017. In May of that year, Turkey, Russia, and Iran designated the rebel-held areas of the Daraa Governorate and adjacent Quneitra Governorate a 'de-escalation zone', one of four such areas.<sup>17</sup> The fear of an influx of Iranian-linked proxies to the border area necessitated separate and additional agreements for southern Syria. In July 2017, the United States, Russia, and Jordan brokered an additional ceasefire for the

6. Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: From 'authoritarian upgrading' to Revolution?," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 88, no. 1 (2012): 95–113.

7. International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-Motion Revolution," Middle East/North Africa Report (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 6 July 2011).

8. These are Mahmoud Jawabrah and Hussam Ayyash. Interview, local activists, Daraa city, 2017.

9. Aron Lund, "The Battle for Daraa," Carnegie Middle East Center, 25 June 2015.

10. The MOC was staffed by government agents from states such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and provided funding and material support to vetted rebel groups in southern Syria. See: Aron Lund, "The Battle for Daraa," Carnegie Middle East Center, 25 June 2015; Phil Sands and Suha Maayeh, "Syrian Rebels Get Arms and Advice through Secret Command Centre in Amman," *The National*, 28 December 2013.

11. The Nasib border crossing began operating in 1997 and became one of the busiest Syrian border crossings. Prior to 2011, the border crossing facilitated the trade flow between Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Gulf states.

12. Chris Kozak, "Control of Terrain in Syria: December 2015," Institute for the Study of War, 23 December 2015.

13. The *Liwa Shuhadaa al-Yarmouk* became the backbone of *Jayish Khalid bin al-Walid* (Khalid ibn al-Walid Army), an ISIS affiliate in southern Syria, which emerged in early 2016.

14. *Jabhat al-Nusra* is a Salafi-Jihadi rebel organization that was originally formed in Syria as an affiliate of al-Qaeda. In 2016, the group announced the split from al-Qaida and changed its name to *Jabhat Fath al-Sham* (Front for the Conquest of the Levant). In 2017, *Jabhat Fath al-Sham* merged with other rebel organizations, resulting in the formation of a new group called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant).

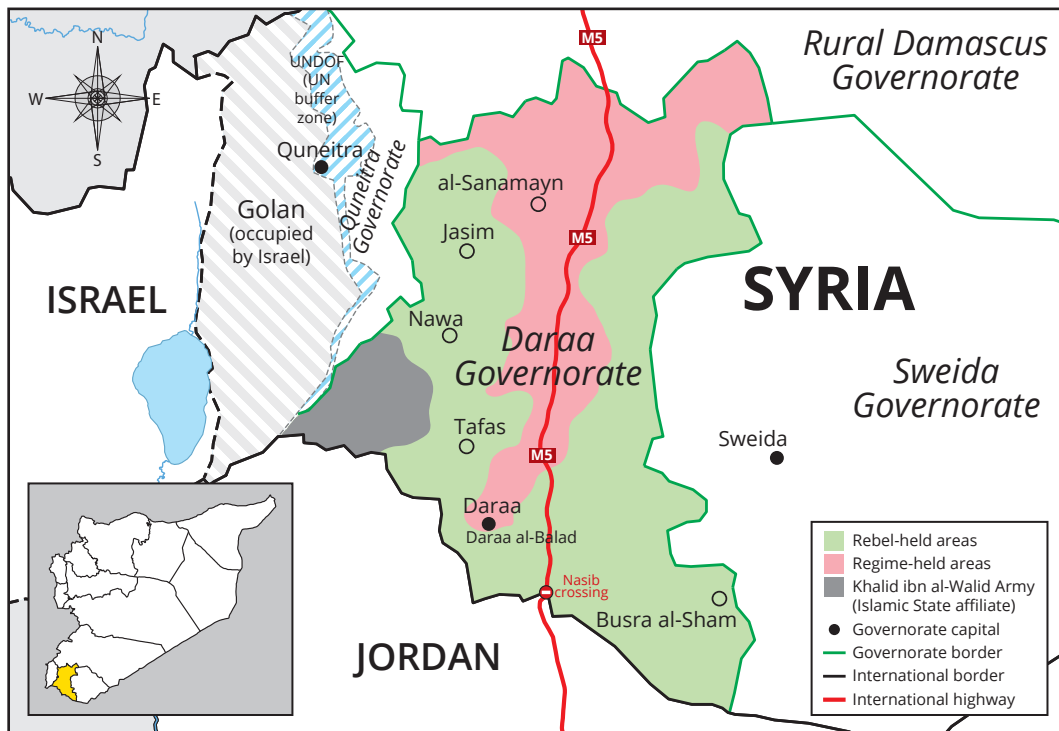
15. In May 2016, *Liwa Shuhadaa al-Yarmouk* merged with Salafi-Jihadi rebel factions and formed *Jayish Khalid bin al-Walid* (Khalid ibn al-Walid Army).

16. Jordan Times, "Jordan, Russia Set up Mechanism of Military Coordination Concerning South Syria," Jordan Times, 24 October 2015.

17. On 4 May 2017, in the Kazakh capital of Astana, Turkey, Russia, and Iran jointly declared the existence of four de-escalation zones. These zones encompassed southern Syria, the East Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, the northern Homs countryside, and Idlib Governorate along with its neighboring regions.

southern reaches of Syria.<sup>18</sup> In November 2017, the U.S, Russia, and Jordan jointly endorsed a Memorandum of Principles, which reaffirmed the shared commitment of these three states to eliminate the presence of non-Syrian foreign forces, including Iranian-linked forces, along with Jihadi and extremist groups from the southern region.<sup>19</sup> While sporadic skirmishes and shelling have persisted, aerial bombardment, a clear breach of the initial de-escalation agreement, has occurred on multiple occasions. In December 2017, the U.S decision to end the programme to provide arms and supplies to Syrian rebel groups, initiated in July, was fully executed.<sup>20</sup>

Map 2: Territorial Control in Daraa Governorate Prior to the 2018 Military Operation



By 2018, the regime, backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, began to turn the tide in the civil war. By combining negotiations with civilian opposition figures and rebel leaders with unrestrained and indiscriminate use of violence, Russia has been able to enforce reconciliation agreements.<sup>21</sup> This carrot-and-stick approach effectively coerced rebels into surrendering in Eastern Ghouta and northern Homs and allowed the regime to reclaim full authority and establish absolute control over the reclaimed territories and their inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> Having recaptured areas in Syria's western interior, on 13 June 2018, President Bashar al-Assad suggested that southern Syria would be the next target for conquest.<sup>23</sup> On 19 June 2018, the military offensive commenced with Syrian warplanes launching intense airstrikes on rebel strongholds in the eastern part of the Daraa Governorate. By 23 June, Russian aircraft joined to back the regime offensive, conducting airstrikes on rebel targets. As Russian

18. Ellen Francis, "U.S.-Russian Ceasefire Deal Holding in Southwest Syria," Reuters, 9 July 2017.

19. United States Department of State, "Background Briefing on the Joint Statement by the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Federation on Syria," United States Department of State, 11 November 2017. Neither the original trilateral de-escalation agreement nor the memorandum of principles have been publicly disclosed.

20. David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt, and Ben Hubbard, "Trump Ends Covert Aid to Syrian Rebels Trying to Topple Assad," The New York Times, 20 July 2017; Hamdan Sibastian, "Did 'The MOC' halt its Projects in Southern Syria?," Almodon, 29 December 2017.

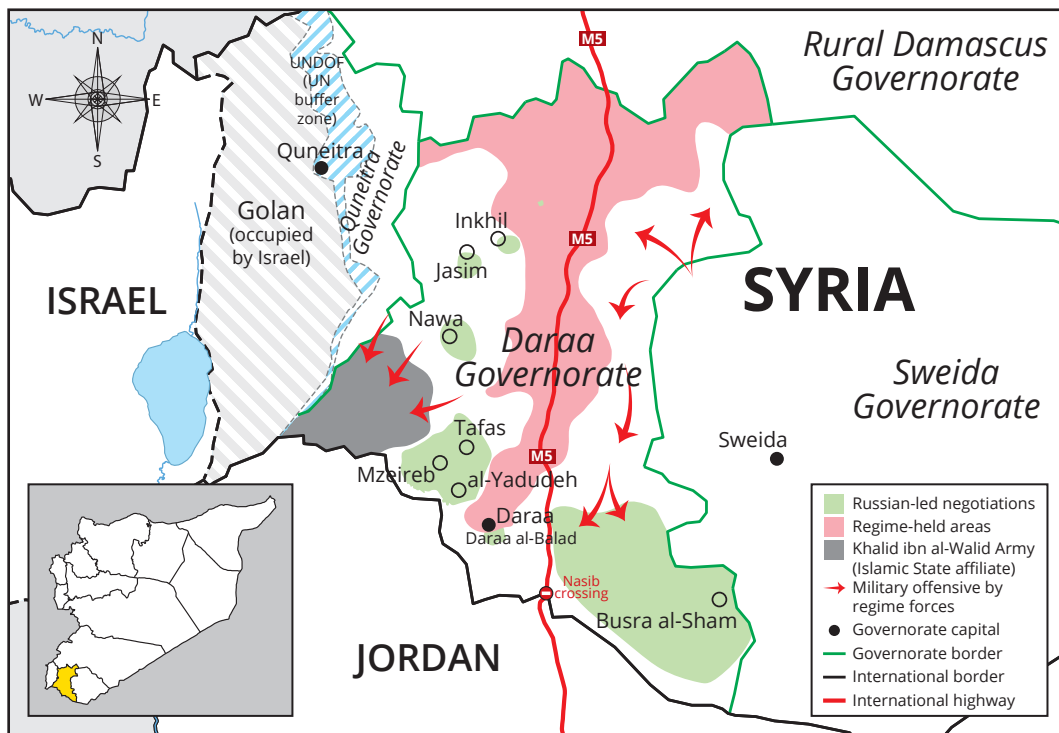
21. Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, "Syria's Reconciliation Agreements," Syria Studies 9, no. 2 (2017): 1–14.

22. Mazen Ezzi, "Post-Reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?" (Florence: European University Institute, 27 November 2020); Ayman Al-Dassouky, "The Families of Rastan and the Syrian Regime: Transformation and Continuity" (Florence: European University Institute, August 6, 2021).

23. Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, "President Al-Assad in an Interview with Al-Alam TV: The Syrian-Iranian Relationship Is Strategic. The Strongest Response against Israel Is to Strike Its Terrorists in Syria," Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, 13 June 2018.

warplanes intensified their bombardment of rebel positions, the fear of regional escalation and the increasing concerns of Israel and Jordan about the flow of Iranian-linked forces into a border region compelled Russia to forge a lenient approach for a regime return to the south. As the regime advanced, recapturing territory using the force of arms, Russia offered the rebels the opportunity to engage in negotiations with regime representatives (see Map 3).

Map 3: The 2018 Southern Syria Military Operation



Convened in the city of Busra al-Sham in eastern Daraa Governorate, Russian-brokered negotiations between state representatives and an opposition delegation headed by Ahmad al-Oda, a rebel leader of the *Quwwat Shabab al-Sunna* (Sunna Youth Forces). The negotiations resulted in an agreement that led to rebel surrender in early July. In return for a comprehensive and immediate ceasefire and a handover of heavy and medium-sized weapons, the agreement stipulated: (1) the return of people displaced by the recent military operations to their localities; (2) the Syrian flag to be raised simultaneously with the re-opening of civilian state institutions to resumes service provision; (3) the release of detainees; (4) settling the status of wanted individuals, including military defectors and draft dodgers; (5) the integration of former rebels in the Russian-backed Fifth Corps of the Syrian army and a commitment to fight IS;<sup>24</sup> (6) the return of dismissed employees to their government posts; and (7) the displacement of reconciliation rejectionists to rebel-held parts of the Idlib Governorate in north-west Syria.<sup>25</sup> Following the path of al-Oda, rebel leaders in Tafas town in western Daraa Governorate, accepted a Russian-negotiated surrender on 8 July.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike other regions where reconciliation agreements were concluded, the agreement in the Daraa Governorate included two unique provisions. Firstly, it allowed former rebels to retain possession of

24. The Fifth Assault Corps was established by Russia in November 2016 and fell under a joint Syrian-Russian command. See: Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria" (Florence: European University Institute, May 2019).

25. 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 (European University Institute, January 2019).

26. Interviews with former rebel leaders in Tafas town and Daraa al-Balad of Daraa city, September 2018.

their individual light weapons. Secondly, it prevented the Syrian military and security apparatus from accessing or establishing a presence in areas where a reconciliation agreement was concluded. Rebel leaders in localities across the region followed suit. Nawa, Jasim, Inkhil towns in the north-western Daraa Governorate entered into a reconciliation agreements with the regime with Russian guarantees.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, significant evacuations occurred in the south, with approximately 15,000 rebels, along with their families and other rejectionists of reconciliation, departing for rebel-held territories in the Idlib Governorate.<sup>28</sup> The final battle unfolded as the regime confronted *Jayish Khalid bin al-Walid* (Khalid ibn al-Walid Army), an affiliate of the IS, in al-Yarmouk Basin. By 1 August 2018, the regime declared control over the region, having defeated and reclaimed the last stronghold held by the group in the far south-western corner of the Daraa Governorate.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. Territorial Fragmentation and the Rise of New Powerbrokers

Although the complex and multi-faceted insurgency was defeated, the parallel yet disjointed processes of regime return, have transformed Daraa's map into an archipelago of distinct and contested micro political orders, determining which actors are present and which territories they control. Based on the strategy of regime return, the Daraa Governorate can be divided into two main areas of control.

The first type of area includes localities recaptured by the regime itself using the force of arms. This strategy allowed the regime to assert firmer security control and paved the way for the return of state-affiliated and allied armed actors with no limitations or restrictions imposed on their presence. Since July 2018, a plethora of military and security apparatuses have all deployed additional forces in southern Syria, subsequently extending their reach into localities that were militarily regained by the regime. Leveraging a significant military and security presence, these actors conducted arrests with minimal resistance. Between August 2018 and December 2023, military and security forces have reportedly arrested 2,870 individuals, with only 1,540 of them subsequently released.<sup>30</sup> The unrestricted regime return to these areas allowed the Iranian-backed militias, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, to expand their influence under the cover of the Fourth Armoured Division and Air Force Intelligence to avoid Israeli strikes.

The second type of area includes localities covered by the Russian-led reconciliation agreements (see Map 4). These include Busra al-Sham city, Tafas town, some localities surrounding them, as well as the Daraa al-Balad area of Daraa city. These areas were characterized by a return of state institutions, but not of the Syrian army and security services. Furthermore, these area witnessed the rise of new powerbrokers, who wielded significant influence within their respective communities and played important roles in post-war local affairs. In the Daraa al-Balad area and Tafas town, two distinct Central Negotiation Committees (CNC) were established shortly after the conclusion of the reconciliation agreement. The two entities were comprised mainly of members representing a diverse cross-section of the local community, including former rebel leaders, civilian opposition figures, religious figures, and lawyers. While the CNC in Daraa al-Balad wielded authority within its designated area, the CNC of Tafas town extended its influence across multiple localities throughout the western region of the Daraa Governorate. The latter enjoyed links with numerous local armed groups scattered across the western region, many of which served as its executive force. In the eyes of the local population, the primary source of

27. Interview with rebel leaders and local activists in Nawa, Jasim, and Inkhil towns, August 2018.

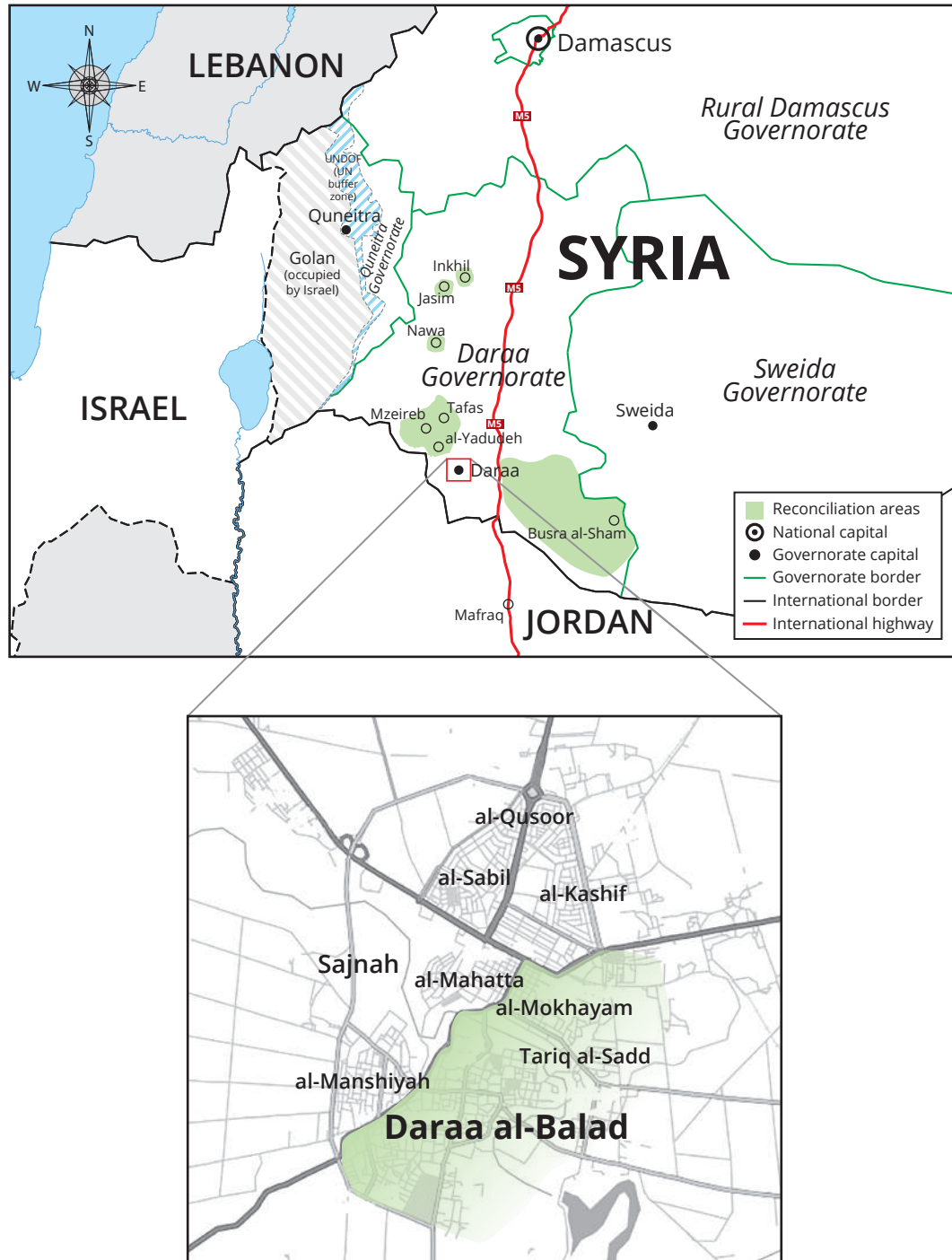
28. Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations."

29. Syrian Arab News Agency, "Army Liberates Village of Al-Qusayr, Last Daesh Terrorist Stronghold in Daraa and Finds Israeli and American Weapons in Their Dens in al-Yarmouk Basin," 1 August 2018.

30. "Comprehensive Statistical Report on Violations in Daraa Governorate 2023", Horan Free League, 5 January 2023.

legitimacy of the CNCs stemmed from pre-existing social and clan ties between its members and the inhabitants of the area, as well as from endorsement by many clan shaykhs.<sup>31</sup>

Map 4: Reconciliation Areas in Daraa Governorate



With an access to state and decision-making corridors, the CNCs emerged as a representative entity, acting as an intermediary between the local communities, Russia and state officials, particularly to ensure the implementation of the terms of the 2018 reconciliation agreement. The CNCs have also

31. Series of interviews with civilians in Tafas town and in Daraa al-Balad area of Daraa city, August 2019.

operated to diffuse tensions and prevent the regime from encroaching on reconciliation areas. However, the degree of success of the CNC in Daraa al-Balad area differs from that in Tafas town. The CNC of Daraa al-Balad has been largely ineffective in de-escalating tensions and preventing regime military offensives. The failure of the CNC to prevent the 2021 military offensive on the Daraa al-Balad area not only reveals such ineffectiveness but also marks a crucial moment where the legitimacy of the CNC began to deteriorate.<sup>32</sup> In August 2022, CNC disbanded itself, leaving representation of the area to traditional clan-based and familial entities.<sup>33</sup>

Conversely, for many locals, the CNC in Tafas showcased a relative success in averting regime-led military offensives. For example, in August 2022, the CNC reached an agreement with security officials that prevented a military escalation. In return for a ceasefire and withdrawal of military forces from the outskirts of Tafas town, the CNC consented to allow regime forces entry into the town to conduct limited searches of certain homes and verify the identity of its residents.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the CNC in Tafas faced a wave of assassinations whereby at least ten members were assassinated by unknown actors, while others abandoned the entity and fled the country.<sup>35</sup> In spite of that, the CNC in Tafas continues to act as a representative entity, with authority exercised mostly by members leading armed groups.

In the eastern region of Daraa, a different power broker emerged and dominated the landscape. Headquartered in the city of Busra al-Sham, the Eighth Brigade was established by Russia in October 2018, initially as a subdivision of the Fifth Corps of the Syrian army.<sup>36</sup> Under the leadership of al-Oda, the Eighth Brigade integrated nearly 1,600 former rebels, about 900 of whom are former rebels from Busra al-Sham and its surrounding localities.<sup>37</sup> Russia's intention in remobilising former rebels into a military structure was to establish a local armed actor, with a wide margin of manoeuvre, to handle local security affairs and inflict acceptable and monitored small-scale episodes of violence to limit the state's authority and keep Iranian influence at bay.<sup>38</sup> The Eighth Brigade had a monopoly on the use of force to manage the security. It assumed the task of maintaining security and local order by running regular patrols on main roads and highways, managing checkpoints, combating illicit drug trafficking, and enforcing a degree of weapons control.

For many locals, the leadership of the Eighth Brigade has been able to cultivate an aura of legitimacy derived from several sources, including pre-existing familial links and blood-ties between the leadership and the local population, endorsement by clan shaykhs, and its capacity to establish channels with state officials, Russia, and Jordan.<sup>39</sup> Like the CNCs, the Eighth Brigade played an important intermediary role, albeit with effectiveness that surpasses that of the CNCs. By leveraging Russian patronage, as well as its ability to use, or threat to use, small-scale, limited episodes of violence, the Eighth Brigade wielded bargaining power to bolster its intermediary initiatives. On many occasions, locals appealed to the leadership of the Eighth Brigade to help free individuals arbitrarily detained by military and security checkpoints in the Daraa Governorate. While many of these interventions resulted in the immediate,

32. During the offensive, some CNC members signed an unpublished version of an agreement, which permitted full regime control and the handover of most small and medium weapons, conditions viewed by the community as red lines. This pushed many locals to raise questions about the 'transparency,' 'credibility,' and 'legitimacy' of the CNC. For many unreconciled rebels, this was stark evidence of 'betrayal'. See: Abdullah al-Jabassini, *"Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria,"* Policy Brief (European University Institute, October 2021); Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Russia Rethinks the Status Quo in Southern Syria," Middle East Institute, 13 August 2021.

33. In July 2022, the regime demanded the evacuation of wanted individuals accused of having links with the Islamic State from the area. Confronted with escalating pressure from the regime and the reluctance of certain clans to collaborate with the CNC in its efforts to displace local residents, the CNC disbanded itself. Interviews with a local activist in Daraa al-Balad of Daraa city, August 2022.

34. *"An Agreement Ends the Escalation in Tafas.. Learn about Its Terms,"* Horan Free League, 13 August 2022.

35. *"Assassination of a Member of the Central Committee in the Western Countryside of Daraa,"* Daraa 24, 9 December 2021.

36. Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria".

37. Abdullah al-Jabassini, *"The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria,"* (European University Institute & Geneva Centre for Security Policy, December 2020).

38. Ibid.

39. Series of interviews with civilians in Busra al-Sham city, October-December 2019.

non-violent release of captives, in several instances, the situation rapidly escalated and broke into armed confrontations with state forces, leading to deaths and injuries.<sup>40</sup> The effectiveness of the Eighth Brigade's intermediary initiatives has further solidified its legitimacy, elevated its standing, and established it as a primary entity for voicing concerns.

By 2021, the Russian patronage to the Eighth Brigade began to erode after the Eighth Brigade rejected Russian orders to establish permanent camps in the Badia of the Homs Governorate and participate in battles against the IS.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, in June 2021, Russia ceased the payment of salaries to Eighth Brigade members. Later, in September 2021, Russia removed the Eighth Brigade from the organizational structure of the Fifth Corps, transferring its registries and affiliation to Military Security Intelligence. However, the Eighth Brigade's connection with Military Security Intelligence remained nominal, primarily focusing on securing salaries and logistical support.<sup>42</sup>

The relationship between Russia and the Eighth Brigade further deteriorated following the eruption of the Russian war on Ukraine in February 2022, when the leadership of the Eighth Brigade openly rejected a request made by Russian officers to participate in the war on Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> Although Russian officers maintained a level of coordination with leaders of the Eighth Brigade, this collaboration did not consistently translate into compliance with Russian policies by the Eighth Brigade. For instance, in mid-February 2024, Syrian military forces raided Mahjeh town in the north-west Daraa Governorate looking for individuals accused of detonating a Russian Military Police patrol convoy and killing one person in December 2023. While a Russian patrol was observing the operation from a distance, the Eighth Brigade mobilized its forces to deter the Syrian military and engaged in clashes, which ultimately forced the military forces to withdraw.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Patterns of Violence in Post-war Daraa Governorate

Ever since the regime returned to the south, violence in Daraa Governorate has become increasingly widespread. Hardly a day goes by without locals hearing accounts of assassinations, kidnappings, roadside explosive devices, drive-by shootings carried out mostly by unknown actors, with no signs of this decreasing. Many people, including ordinary civilians, government employees, Ba'ath Party officials, CNC members, Eighth Brigade personnel, former rebels, and opposition figures have been the targets of assassinations. Even collaborators with Iran, members of the regime's security and military apparatus, and Russian personnel have found themselves in the crosshairs of assailants. At least 2,400 individuals have been killed between August 2018 and June 2024.<sup>45</sup>

**“Chaos and violence have become part of our daily lives. We have no idea who is killing whom and for what reasons.”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, May 2024.*

40. For instance, in June 2020 the Eighth Brigade deployed its forces to release the former head of the disbanded opposition local council in Mahja town from detention by the State Security Service. During the confrontation, armed attacks broke out and led to casualties on both sides. The clashes extended beyond Mahjeh, with several erupting in Kahil and Sayda towns, which resulted in seizing control of state military and security checkpoints by the Eighth Brigade. See: “*Consecutive Events.. Tearing up Images of Assad in Daraa*,” Enab Baladi, 29 June 2020.

41. This rejection, as explained by one of its members, stemmed from the unwillingness of the leaders of the Eighth Brigade to fight alongside Iranian-backed militias. Interview with Eighth Brigade fighter, October 2021.

42. Interview with a commander in the Eighth Brigade, March 2022.

43. The meeting took place in March 2022 in Busra al-Sham city. During the meeting, the leadership of the Eighth Brigade blatantly rejected the Russian request, stating that it is not a mercenary unit, and its mission is to focus on securing southern Syria. Interview with a commander in the Eighth Brigade, March 2022.

44. Interview with Eighth Brigade fighter, February 2024.

45. Private dataset on post-war violence in Daraa Governorate constructed by the author since July 2018.



Speaking of violence in southern Syria, two observations warrant mention. First, not all instances of violence are politically motivated. The aftermath of the war has left a legacy of private conflicts, unresolved disputes, and tribal vendettas that, although not directly linked to the main conflict, still contribute to ongoing cycles of violence. The lack of information about the perpetrators of many violent incidents often blurs the distinction between public and private conflicts, complicating efforts to discern motivations. Second, there is an evident spatial variation in the frequency of violence throughout the region. While a significant number of violent incidents occurred in the central and western regions of the Daraa Governorate, Busra al-Sham and its environs in the eastern part enjoy comparatively greater security.

While not exhaustive and often entangled and intertwined, the following categorisation offers insights into the underlying causes and patterns of violence in the post-war Daraa Governorate. First are the military escalations by the Syrian regime. From the outset, the regime was dissatisfied with the agreement brokered by Russia in 2018. In large part this was because it prevented the regime from reconstituting its full authority in some parts of the south. The regime realised that launching small-scale military offensives against reconciliation areas is one way to contest the *status quo* and expand its authority. This strategic manoeuvring was largely backed by Iran, which saw in such expansion of regime control an opening to expand its influence and secure geopolitical leverage in the border region. For example, in March 2020, the regime, backed by Iran, launched a military operation to recapture a rebel-held portion of al-Sanamayn city located in western Daraa. This offensive triggered protests and solidarity attacks by former rebels on regime military and security checkpoints across the governorate.<sup>46</sup>

For Russia, intervening to diffuse tensions between the regime and former rebels was necessary to maintain the *status quo*. Hence the military operation in al-Sanamayn ended with an intervention by the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade, which brokered a deal that led to the exile of 21 rebels to the rebel-held city of al-Bab in the Aleppo governorate, and a further 80 to reconcile their status with the Syrian regime.<sup>47</sup> In other instances, military allowed the regime to deploy additional forces in parts of the south. For example, in May 2020, the regime exploited the killing of nine local policemen by a former rebel leader in Mzeireb town.<sup>48</sup> In response, the regime sent in military units, spearheaded by the Iranian-backed Fourth Division, and strengthened its position in south-western parts of Daraa Governorate.<sup>49</sup>

Second in this categorisation are the vigilante operations initiated by local armed groups. During several talks with representatives of reconciliation areas, regime officials have repeatedly used the presence of IS members in some localities as a justification to launch a military operation.<sup>50</sup> To deprive the regime of a major pretext to encroach on reconciliation areas, local armed factions activated means of monitoring, investigating, and eradicating members of IS clandestine networks. For example, in October 2022, local armed groups carried out a military operation to clear Jasim city of IS sleeper cells and killed three of its leaders.<sup>51</sup> Shortly after, a similar operation unfolded in Daraa al-Balad. Backed by the Eighth Brigade, local armed factions have launched an operation to fight a group accused of having ties with IS.<sup>52</sup> In mid-November, the operation reached its conclusion, resulting in the killing of numer-

46. Armed attacks were reported in localities such as Hrak, Shaem al-Golan, al-Sahwa, and Um Walad.

47. "Daraa' Is a Renewed Revolutionary Movement Whose Latest Stop Is Al-Sanamayn.. Details of the Assad Regime's Campaign Against It," Horan Free League, 8 March 2020.

48. "Have the Negotiations Ended in Daraa?," Horan Free League, 15 May 2020.

49. "Contrary to What was Agreed Upon, A New Deployment of the Fourth Division in West of Daraa," Horan Free League, 30 May 2020.

50. "Failure in Negotiations between the Syrian Regime Delegation and Jasim's Notables," September 7, 2022.

51. "Jasim: The Killing of the Iraqi...the Beginning of the End of the Organization," Horan Free League, 17 October 2022.

52. This group is led by Mohammed al-Masalmeh and Mouyad Harfoush. These are two figures that the Syrian regime has demanded their relocation to northern Syria during Daraa al-Balad offensive in August 2021. See: Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria."

ous IS combatants, while others have reportedly retreated from the area.<sup>53</sup>

**“We took it upon ourselves to provide security to the local population. Ensuring security is one way to prevent the regime from using chaos as a pretext to enter our areas.”**

*A member of local armed group in Daraa Governorate, June 2024.*

Similarly, local armed groups have planned and executed security operations to combat drug trade. For instance, in January 2024 local armed factions raided a farm near Tafas town, arrested members of a criminal group active in the drug trade and killed a renowned drug trader, Abdullah Ghazi al-Badawi.<sup>54</sup> In the same month, a local armed group raided farms between the cities of Tafas, Da’el and ‘Atman and clashed with drug traders. The clashes led to the killing of one drug trader and the arrest of three others, one of whom is the brother of Rafe’ al-Rwayes, a renowned drug trader in Daraa Governorate known for his close ties with Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>55</sup>

The third category is violence stimulated by rivalry among local armed factions. Post-war Daraa is characterized by a proliferation of local armed groups. At least 190 local armed groups with various affiliations have emerged and operated in the region since July 2018.<sup>56</sup> This abundance of armed groups has fragmented authority in many localities, as they engage in cycles of retaliatory assassinations in pursuit of control, resources, and sway over the population. On many occasions, rivalry has escalated into violent confrontations, leaving civilians susceptible to victimization. For instance, in April 2021, two rival local armed groups, one backed by the Military Intelligence Service and one by the State Security Service, engaged in fierce clashes in the city of al-Sanamayn. The clashes resulted in the killing of 26 individuals, including children.<sup>57</sup> In the same month, violent confrontations erupted between two rival local armed factions in Jasim city. The catalyst was the arrest and interrogation by one faction of three members of the other faction regarding a child abduction case. Clashes resulted in the loss of lives and widespread destruction of property.<sup>58</sup>

**“No one knows the actual number of armed groups in our city. Each one controls one or two streets, with no clear goal except extorting locals and contesting for authority. Tension is constant, and we constantly witness clashes that endanger our lives.”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, June 2024.*

Fourth, in a region where tribal structures hold significant influence, disputes between members of different clans have on many occasions escalated into violent confrontations, leading to casualties, displacement of populations, and societal divisions. While such conflicts often stem from historical grievances, revenge, or the escalation of daily disputes, they have the potential to become swiftly politicized, especially when they draw in local armed groups. Between July 2018 and June 2024, there have been 35 recorded tribal clashes that led to the killing of 36 individuals and the injury of 23.<sup>59</sup> In many cases, the regime has used tribal confrontations as a pretext to play its role as arbiter of local

53. Interview with a local activists in Daraa city, November 2022.

54. Interview with members of local armed group in a locality near the Syrian Jordanian border, January 2024.

55. Interview with a local activist in western Daraa, May 2024.

56. Private dataset on local armed groups constructed by the author since July 2018.

57. “26 People from the City of Al-Sanamayn Were Killed within 24 Hours,” Daraa 24, 7 April 2024.

58. “Clashes in the City of Jasim.. What Is the Regime’s Role?,” Horan Free League, 18 April 2024.

59. Private dataset on local armed groups constructed by the author since July 2018.

conflicts by launching a military offensive, with the aim of regaining absolute control and a firm grip on loosely controlled areas. For example, in mid-January 2021, clashes erupted between members of the az-Zu'bi and Kiwan clans in Tafas town. Both sides used medium-sized weapons, leaving at least five people dead.<sup>60</sup> The regime has sought to exploit the dispute and push for stronger security control in and around Tafas, in particular by deploying forces from the Fourth Armoured Division in the surrounding area. Russia ultimately managed to facilitate an agreement, which stipulated the handover of weapons, the reopening of the police station and three other civilian institutions in Tafas, and permission for units of the Fourth Armoured Division to conduct searches in specific localities.<sup>61</sup>

Last, but not least, criminal activities, such as homicide, robbery, mugging, and kidnapping-for-ransom have become widespread practices in Daraa Governorate. In 2021, the region registered the highest number of homicide victims, with 115 out of 414 victims nationally.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, drug smuggling continues to trigger cycles of violence. The Daraa Governorate, notably through its proximity to Jordan, plays a significant role as a smuggling gateway, with a focus on illegal products such as drugs and weapons. In response, Jordan has ramped up its military operations to deter smuggling attempts and foil drug trafficking operations.<sup>63</sup> Simultaneously, the region has emerged as a domestic market for illicit drugs in its own right. The fragile post-war environment, coupled with dire economic conditions, poverty, and a high unemployment rate, have enabled local stakeholders embedded in narcotics trafficking networks to recruit dealers for the local trade of drugs. Because dealers sell drugs for cash, but also accept items such as motorbikes, jewellery, car parts, copper cables, livestock, and solar panels, many addicts have engaged in thievery to acquire money for drugs.<sup>64</sup> In 2019 and 2020, nearly 90% of thefts dealt with by police stations in Daraa were committed by drug dealers and users.<sup>65</sup> In numerous instances, drug traders fell victim to assassinations carried out by unidentified armed groups. In 2023, 58 attempted assassinations by unidentified armed actors have targeted drug traders, which led to the killing of 35.<sup>66</sup>

**“We are losing an entire generation. Unemployment and poverty are major factors contributing not only to the rise in theft and homicide but also to the increase in drug consumption and dealing among youth. Are you aware that you can buy drugs at schools today?”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, June 2024.*

## 4. Local Governance in Turbulent Times: What is the Role of Local Communities?

Following the outcomes of the 2018 reconciliation agreement, civilian state institutions have reopened and begun providing services, such as civil registries, schools, hospitals, the post, electricity, and water. However, infrastructure damage and reduced operability, a sharp decline in numbers in the workforce, and the inability of state institutions to provide effective service provision have all contributed to worsening living standards in the Daraa Governorate.

60. “Five Civilians Were Killed in Tribal Clashes in Tafas,” Enab Baladi, January 14, 2021.

61. “The Central Negotiations Committee and the Regime.. The Final Meeting,” Horan Free League, 8 February 2021.

62. “414 Homicide Victims, 50 Percent Detected within 48 Hours and 95 Percent Within Two Weeks,” Al-Watan, 14 December 2021.

63. For example, in January 2022, the Jordanian Armed Forces announced that they had foiled several drug trafficking operations on Jordan's northeastern border with Syria, killing 27 smugglers and injuring others. See: “Armed Forces: Thwarted Several Infiltration and Smuggling Attempts, Killing 27 Smugglers,” Petra News Agency, 27 January 2022.

64. Interview, former rebel, western Daraa, 2022.

65. “Drugs in Daraa, an Organized Operation Targeting Young People in Particular,” Daraa 24, 26 March 2022.

66. Private dataset constructed by the author on political and criminal violence in post-war Daraa Governorate.

A July 2018 assessment of Daraa’s power networks estimated that more than 90% of the overall system had been severely damaged. By March 2020, access to power had been reportedly restored in 120 localities. Nevertheless, frequent electrical faults, a weak electrical current, and illegal connections continued to undermine delivery of electricity. To cope, the government has enforced a rationing policy, however, its effects are keenly felt in rural areas where power shortages stretch for over 20 hours daily.<sup>67</sup> This erratic supply disrupts essential services like water distribution, pushing many to rely on costly alternatives like water tanks sourced from wells at a cost of more than 100,000 SYP (7.9 USD).<sup>68</sup> The education sector bears the scars of conflict too. A significant 45% of schools were reportedly partially or completely destroyed, with 433 out of 988 schools falling victim to bombing by regime forces and the Russian war jets.<sup>69</sup> Despite some reconstruction efforts by the government, the constant reminders of resource shortages hinder large-scale rehabilitation.<sup>70</sup> The scarcity of functional schools has resulted in overcrowded classrooms, some accommodating more than 60 students. The significant shortage of teachers, brought about by government dismissal, migration, dropout due to low wages, have further exacerbated the deterioration of education.<sup>71</sup> Simultaneously, healthcare struggles under the weight of infrastructure damage and a decreasing medical workforce due to flight and dismissal.<sup>72</sup> In February 2024, the number of registered doctors at Daraa’s Health Syndicate stood at 900, 300 of whom have fled the country.<sup>73</sup> The lack of specialized doctors, long waiting times, and prevalent medical negligence have restricted the access of locals to effective medical care.<sup>74</sup>

**“Irregular electricity, lack of drinking water, worsening education, and collapsing healthcare system. Proper services don't exist or are not affordable for citizens. Keep in mind that monthly incomes are minimal. How can anyone survive in such difficult circumstances?”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, May 2024.*

In the face of these challenges, local communities have devised multiple strategies to improve the provision of public goods. In some cases, locals have sought the intervention of both traditional and new power brokers to address their concerns to state institutions. In the northern region of Daraa, for instance, many locals appealed to the parliament member, Farouk al-Hamadi, and the head of Education Directorate in Daraa, Manhal al-Ammarin, to rehabilitate schools. Both individuals, being natives of the region and having connections with the government, have been able to redirect resources towards the reconstruction of schools in the cities of Inkhil and Nawa.<sup>75</sup> In reconciliation areas, locals have appealed to the new power brokers. However, the effectiveness of such intermediary endeavours varies significantly. In Daraa al-Balad, where post-war service provision by the state institutions was described as ‘non-existent,’ ‘corrupt,’ and ‘discriminatory’,<sup>76</sup> the CNC, prior to its dissolution, has often failed to persuade state officials not only to improve service provision, but also to prevent local

67. Series of interviews with locals in eastern and western Daraa, May-June 2024.

68. At the official rate of 12,625 SYP = 1 USD.

69. “Daraa Schools: Many Problems and Persistent Efforts to Save Education,” Horan Free League, 31 March 2021.

70. Interview with a teacher in Daraa city, 2024.

71. “Threatening to Expel Absentees from Monitoring and Correction... Teachers Complain about Their Situation,” Enab Baladi, 27 June 2023; “The Shortage of Teaching Staff Threatens Education in Daraa,” Daraa 24, 16 March 2023. The Syrian regime prevented 760 teachers from returning to their jobs. See: Abdullah al-Jabassini, “Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria,” (European University Institute, April 2020).

72. In December 2018, Daraa’s hospitals were reportedly some of the worst affected in Syria in the course of 2018. See: “Annual Report 2018,” Syrian Arab Republic (World Health Organization (WHO), 2018).

73. “More than a Third of Daraa’s Doctors Are Outside the Country, and Hospitals Are Suffering from a Shortage,” Al-Watan, 14 February 2024, <https://bit.ly/3WwszJr>

74. Interview with a doctor in Daraa, 2024.

75. “Education in Daraa: Security Intervention... and Civil Initiatives to Save the Educational Process,” Horan Free League, 15 September 2022.

76. Series of interviews with civilians in Daraa city, September 2018 - December 2020.

institutions from using extortion as a precondition for service delivery.<sup>77</sup>

**“Civilians in Daraa are marginalized and have no voice. We face significant challenges to directly express our needs and demands to government officials. When we tried, we were ignored.”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, May 2024.*

In Tafas, the CNC has achieved modest success in that realm. In response to calls initiated by the CNC to enhance the infrastructure, state officials have visited and instructed the rehabilitation of schools, a hospital, electricity, water supply, the post, and telecommunication networks.<sup>78</sup> For locals in Tafas and Daraa al-Balad, the ineffectiveness of the mediation efforts by the CNCs stems mainly from the lack of bargaining power and leverage to compel or persuade the state to address and effectively respond to concerns raised by its members. By contrast, the Eighth Brigade in Busra al-Sham city has on many occasions successfully negotiated with state officials to resolve local concerns with regards to deteriorating service delivery.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the intermediary efforts by power brokers, the needs of the local communities far surpass the current initiatives in place. Motivated by solidarity and collective responsibility, many locals have obtained financial assistance from relatives, through access to the diaspora, or dipped into their savings to contribute to grassroots initiatives to improve the provision of essential goods. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local civilian-led emergency initiatives and actions have managed to sanitise schools, print posters and flyers to supplement public awareness campaigns, make free rations and loaves of bread available to families in need, distribute packs of protective gloves and masks, and form mobile medical teams to provide free medicine and check-ups in people's homes.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, between December 2022 and February 2023, more than twenty local initiatives have raised over 30 billion SYP (4.4 million USD). These funds were used by local councils to reconstruct public schools, pave roads, repair wells, install solar panels for street lighting, organise waste disposal and purchase buses to facilitate transport.<sup>81</sup>

**“Local initiatives have become the norm, with constant requests for contributions and donations. While I appreciate community efforts in emergencies, it seems the state has become overly reliant on these initiatives, neglecting its core responsibilities.”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, June 2024.*

In spite of community efforts and a widespread desire to contribute, the dire economic situation is one crucial limitation to engagement in local initiatives. In Daraa Governorate, people are more likely to participate when they have excess resources available. Reduced employment opportunities and income

77. Abdullah al-Jabassini, “*The Weaponization of Service Delivery in Wartime and Post-War Daraa al-Balad*,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, October 4, 2021.

78. “*After the Truce... Increasing Government Interest in the City of Tafas*,” Enab Baladi, 23 February 2021; “*The Central Committee in Daraa Calls on the Ministry of Health to Support Tafas National Hospital*,” Enab Baladi, 26 February 2021; “*Rehabilitation and Restoration Crews Are on Alert in Tafas*,” Al-Baath Media, 23 September 2021.

79. Abdullah al-Jabassini, “*Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries*,” (European University Institute, 2019).

80. Abdullah al-Jabassini, “*The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria*,” (European University Institute, May 2020).

81. “*Local Initiatives in Daraa: An incapable Regime Begging the Pockets of the Poor*,” Syria Direct, 31 January 2023.

have augmented poverty and have led to an increase in the number of people struggling to meet basic needs.<sup>82</sup> The People of Daraa Governorate are concerned about their ability to make ends meet. The prices of the majority of basic items have increased between 100 to 200 per cent since the beginning of 2023. The prices of food items in the Daraa Governorate increased by an average of 119 per cent, which is higher than the rest of the country.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, in a region where the local economy is predominantly driven by agriculture, worsening security conditions and the presence of explosives have severely obstructed access to fields, significantly disrupting agricultural activities. The deterioration of the agricultural activities are further exacerbated by the government's elimination of fertilizer subsidies, drought, illegal well drilling, and rising prices for seeds, pesticides, and fuel have made it increasingly challenging for farmers to sustain their livelihoods and generate income through agriculture.<sup>84</sup> In February 2024, around 74% of the population in Daraa, totalling approximately 800,000 out of 1.08 million people, were reported to be in need.<sup>85</sup> While many have sold household assets, goods, and livestock to cope, the dire economic situation and diminishing resources are crucial factors that limited people's desire and ability to contribute to local initiatives.

**“My income is not enough to cover our basic needs, which aren't always accessible or available. I have already sold my land and used up all my savings just to afford essentials. For many years now, the worry of how to feed my children keeps me up at night.”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, June 2024.*

In the face of ongoing insecurity, worsening economic conditions, and deteriorating local governance, many locals have made the decision to migrate.<sup>86</sup> To fund their migration, individuals often tap into their savings, liquidate assets such as land, apartments, furniture, vehicles, or livestock when available. Some also seek financial assistance from cross-border networks and the broader diaspora, particularly in Gulf Kingdoms. Given the increasing reliance of locals on remittances to secure their daily necessities,<sup>87</sup> in some instances, contractual arrangements stipulate that the family provides funds for one (or more) of its members to migrate on the condition that they will contribute to the household income by sending regular remittances once they start working. Nevertheless, poverty, high risk of arrest or death *en route*, and socio-cultural factors, particularly in closely-knit families where some members are highly dependent on others, are crucial factors that hinder the decision to migrate. Leveraging existing social networks that promote welcoming environments, Germany and the Netherlands remain the most sought-after European destinations for prospective migrants from the Daraa Governorate.<sup>88</sup>

**“We are fed up with the situation. It seems that Daraa is doomed to endure chaos and poverty. No one can live in such conditions. After years of opposing the idea, I have concluded that migration is the only way to survive.”**

*A civilian in Daraa Governorate, May 2024.*

82. “Increasing Unemployment Rates in Daraa Governorate,” Daraa 24, 17 August 2022.

83. OCHA, “Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Overview: As Sweida, Dar’a and Quneitra Governorates”, March 2024.

84. Joseph Daher, “Cuts to Oil Derivative Subsidies: Consequences for Syria,” (European University Institute, October 2021). A series of interviews with agricultural engineers (June – November 2021).

85. “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” Humanitarian Programme Cycle (OCHA, February 2024).

86. For example, some 8,000-10,000 people, most young adults, fled Syria between June and December 2021. See: Abdullah al-Jabassini, “Migration from Post-War Southern Syria: Drivers, Routes, and Destinations,” (European University Institute, January 2022).

87. Joseph Daher, “Syrian Remittances: An Analysis from the Recipients’ Side,” Paper presentation, 5 November 2021.

88. Abdullah al-Jabassini, “Migration from Post-War Southern Syria: Drivers, Routes, and Destinations.”

## Conclusion

The complex landscape of the post-war Daraa Governorate presents a multifaceted narrative of territorial fragmentation, resurgence of violence, power struggles, and community resilience. The modality of regime return to the south in 2018 highlights the interconnectedness of local, regional, and international factors in shaping the post-war order. Characterized by a blend of military coercion and Russian-led negotiated settlements, the model of regime return has laid bare territorial fragmentation within the region. The persistent violence, ranging from regime-led military escalations to local armed confrontations, tribal disputes, competing local armed groups, and criminal activities underscore the fragility of the post-war landscape in the Daraa Governorate.

Despite the formal reopening of state institutions, the provision of essential services remains inadequate, with infrastructure damage, a reduced workforce, and institutional inefficiencies contributing to worsening living standards. In response to these challenges, local communities have employed various strategies to address their needs, including seeking intervention from traditional and new power brokers to launching grassroots initiatives. Despite limitations stemming from economic constraints and diminishing resources, local communities have launched initiatives aimed at improving infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other essential services. Nevertheless, the challenges remain daunting, with widespread poverty, economic hardship, and insecurity driving many locals to consider migration as a means of seeking a better life elsewhere.

Volatility will continue to define Syria's southern region for the foreseeable future, given its status as a focal point for both local and regional actors competing for power and influence. The Syrian regime will continue to manoeuvre to impose greater security control. Meanwhile, Iran will continue to operate to expand its influence in the southern governorate, especially since the Ukraine war has weakened Russia's influence in the region and regional tensions rise from the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip. However, Iran, in its quest for increased influence in the region, will continue to encounter notable challenges. A significant portion of the population in Daraa views Iran with suspicion, perceiving it as an adversary. This deep-seated sentiment poses a significant challenge to Iran's efforts to expand its influence in the region. Moreover, the Israeli airstrikes will continue to act as a deterrent against any perceived Iranian military activities or expansion near its borders, especially amid simmering tensions and looming war between Hezbollah and Israel. Where this entrenched instability will lead remains an open question. For the foreseeable future, however, fragmentation, violence, the breakdown of local governance, and migration will continue to dominate the narratives emerging from southern Syria.

## About the Author

**Abdullah al-Jabassini** is a Max Weber Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Kent in Canterbury. Bridging insights from anthropology and sociology with civil war studies, his doctoral dissertation investigates tribal wartime social order and accounts for the shifts between its forms in the Daraa Governorate situated in southern Syria. Al-Jabassini is a research fellow for the 'Syrian Trajectories: Challenges and Opportunities for Peacebuilding' project at the EUI, and a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C. Previously, he was a research fellow for the 'Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria' project at the EUI and an associate fellow for the 'Striking from the Margins' project at the Central European University in Vienna. His main research interests include political violence and civil war, wartime social order, third-party intervention in civil conflicts, authoritarian conflict management, peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, rebel-military integration, and local governance in areas of limited statehood. Al-Jabassini's academic and policy research focus on wartime and post-war micro dynamics in southern Syria.





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