



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (26)

Reconciliation Initiatives in Daraa: A Testimony for History

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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The southern city of Daraa was the birthplace of the peaceful Syrian uprising that started in March 2012. This genuine Syrian movement was met with accusations of conspiracy and vandalism by the Government of Syria (GoS), whose aggressive responses provoked similar reactions from local population. The Houranian people (Daraa city residents), who are known for their peacefulness and sensitivity towards strangers, detested the militarization of the uprising, and they resisted the increasing presence of foreign armed elements (Hezbollah, Nusra Front, ISIS). The feeling of loss of their identity and space to outsiders was acute.¹

The reconciliation with the GoS came about through negotiations with the Russians in mid-2018. Houran people took it as an opportunity to avoid a costly military confrontation with the GoS, restore peacefulness, and expel the foreign militias. This author was part of the negotiations and involved in deliberations at many junctures, and this testimony was prepared in consultation with the principal members of the reconciliation negotiations with the Russians and the GoS.

The Repercussions of External Interventions:

The external players often had conflicting strategies and aims for Syria, and hence supported different armed groups. Qatar's encouragement and financing of extremist organizations, especially Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), and the rebel groups of Yarmouk Army and the Islamic Muthanna Movement, who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), gave the strong impression that the presence of Qatari-backed rebel groups in the south and those bankrolled by Turkey in the north would serve to strengthen Salafi jihadism, an objective alien to the nascent popular movement in southern Syria. Such a prospect was alarming to the Daraa locals.

In-fighting between the various factions in Daraa also contributed to the factors favoring a reconciliation with the GoS. Before the Russian and Syrian decision to expel the opposition fighters from Ghouta, the security situation in the south had been deteriorating due to a number of factors. Many militants fled to the north or left the country on the boats of death, and a number of the Jordanian leaders of JaN had withdrawn to the north after the "separation" of al Jolani and Al-Zawahiri. The suspension of external financial support also led many fighters to curtail their activities.

The general failure of the Islamists in the north to make any political or military gains at the Astana meetings also highlighted the need for reconciliation. The Muslim Brotherhood and the affiliated Failaq al-Sham rebel group were unable to secure a foothold in the political process, so they relied on earning personal loyalties, such as Bashar Al-Zoubi and Nasr Al-Hariri, during the

¹ Many foreign countries supporting the armed uprising established the Military Operational Center (MOC) in Amman, which symbolized the intervention of the Houran and Syrian affairs.

Astana talks. However, the Turkish influence in the field was too weak to push against a GoS offensive. Meanwhile, a number of southern factions contacted Syrian national figures to attempt to find a resolution that would avoid the risks of a military attack on the south.

This period of extreme turbulence gravely affected the people of the south, whose homes were demolished and families displaced; however, despite its obligations, the “Friends of Syrian people” group of countries seemed indifferent to the south’s fate, abandoning the people and leaving them to pay the price for the mistakes and crimes of external actors. Thus, many people from the region were eager for decent settlements to stop the killing and displacement, the restoration of safety, as well as a way to facilitate the return of refugees and the rehabilitation of the population of the south.

Significantly, more than one national figure from Daraa facilitated meetings with the Russian side, such as those held with Failaq al-Rahman and the Army of Islam in Geneva, which indicated the aims of Hmeimim Operation Center and the Russian Defense Ministry, and their interests in the center and south of the country.

Laying the Foundations of Russian-Sponsored Reconciliations:

The situation in mid-2018 did not favor the rebels of Darra. The region’s bleak prospects were confirmed by the friends of Syria too. The United States of America, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan all informed the Daraa rebels that there were implicit political understandings between Russia and America on the south based on two general lines:

- 1) Maintain the status quo of Al-Tanaf area.
- 2) Quneitra and Daraa to be supervised by the Russians.

Concurrently with these ominous developments, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) announced that the next battle after Ghouta would be southern Syria, a military campaign supported by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and foreign militias, with intense Russian aerial support. Accordingly, eastern Daraa fronts were bombed and the al-Lajat area was besieged. As military operations against Daraa advanced, the SAA took control of Busra al-Harir and Maliha al-Atash, followed by towns such as Al-Hirak, Al-Soura, Al-Maliha Al-Gharbia, and Al-Maliha Al-Sharqiya. In addition, the GoS forces attempted to reach the al-Thala air base in the west of the city and to separate the western and eastern countryside of Daraa. To stop the SAA’s attack on Daraa, mediation was put in place, and serious negotiations were agreed upon in Amman, Nassib crossing, and Busra al-Sham.

Daraa rebels and civilians immediately formed two committees: one for military affairs² and the other for civilians.³ The Russian negotiator was Alexander Zourin, a general in the Russian Military Intelligence, who knew the southern military leaders personally and had negotiated with them on many occasions. He also had dealt with Dr. Khaled Al-Mahamid (from a well-known family in Daraa) in the previous Ghouta negotiations. Aware that any military engagement in Daraa would have severe consequences for all parties to the conflict, and that its human cost would be very high, Zourin insisted on his military command and was determined to find a solution through negotiations, where he succeeded.

There were two rounds of negotiations: the first with the Russians in Amman in June 2018, and the second with the GoS. The first proposal was submitted to the Russian side after the Daraa committee agreed to resolve the situation with guarantees provided by Russia. Politicians, moderate factions, and civic figures tried to reduce their losses by setting conditions for the return of the south to the authority state institutions, and the following agreement was finally reached:

Statement of agreement

On July 1, 2018, the meeting between representatives of the GoS⁴ and the rebel factions took place under Russian mediation, where the following terms were agreed and signed:

- 1) An immediate and comprehensive ceasefire.
- 2) An immediate handing over of heavy weapons.
- 3) The return of the population to villages and towns where the army does not have any control, and the return of the displaced people to the villages in which the army is present, accompanied by the Russian Military Police (RMP) and the Syrian Red Crescent, with a guarantee from the RMP of the safety of the population.
- 4) Starting the handover of medium weapons in the areas covered by the ceasefire.

² Military committee:

- 1) Ahmed Al-Awda, who holds a BA in English literature, and worked as a teacher before 2011;
- 2) Adham al-Karrad (known by his nickname Abu Qusay), the founder of the Shabab al-Sunnah rebel group faction who has a real influence in Busra al-Sham and eastern Daraa (currently he is the commander of the Eighth Brigade in the Fifth Corps), who obtained a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. He played an important role in investing in and developing weapons, and speaks English and Russian. He was in the negotiation committee for the city of Daraa, where he enjoys great popularity;
- 3) Muhammad Khaled Al-Dahni (known by his nickname Abu Munther), a colonel that defected from the SAA, and was a commander of the 18th March armed group and has extensive social relations in the city of Daraa; and
- 4) Bashar al-Zoubi, who worked as a truck driver before 2011, and attended the negotiations as a representative of the political bureau of the Yarmouk Army rebel group, but he withdrew quickly following the request of the pro-Turkish factions attending Astana meetings.

³ Civilian committee:

- 1) Lawyer Adnan Al-Masalmeh, who holds a bachelor's degree, was the head of the civilian committee that took a mandate from 35 civilian political bodies in Daraa Governorate. He is a member of the Daraa Governorate Council and one of the most prominent members of the Central Political Committee (CPC) today that coordinates with other civic figures mentioned below;
- 2) Yasser Al-Danaiqat, the most prominent member of the negotiating committee in the town of Jasim;
- 3) Sheikh Faisal al-Abazid, imam of a mosque in Daraa, who worked as a judge in the "House of Justice"; and
- 4) Sheikh Ahmed Buqirat from Tal Shihab who also worked as a judge in the "House of Justice".

⁴ Represented by Military Intelligence Officer.

- 5) Settling the conditions of the residents of the areas covered by the ceasefire.
- 6) Distributing the settlement points geographically as needed within an agreed-upon mechanism.
- 7) Raising the Syrian flag on the National Institutions, and the resumption of their activities under the auspices of Damascus. simultaneously with the entry of the country's civilian institutions.
- 8) The fighters who settled their situation and want to fight ISIS should join the storming corps, primarily in the southern region.
- 9) Settling the status of defectors and those who are wanted for military service; and delaying their services of six months.
- 10) Working on the return of all employees to their government jobs.
- 11) Solve the problem of detainees and kidnapped persons within the Astana group and exchange the bodies of the dead from both sides.
- 12) Withdrawal of the SAA from populated cities and towns of Daraa.
- 13) This agreement includes the whole southern region.
- 14) The guarantor of this agreement is the Russian side.

Broken Promises:

Neither the Syrian nor the Russian side kept their promises. Behind the rosy picture depicted by the Russians of the future of Daraa lies a dark reality. General Zourin promised me that all IRGC-run foreign militias would withdraw from the Daraa zone and none of the opposition fighters would leave Daraa Governorate. "No green buses," General Zourin told me. The Russian side announced its approval of the development project "Sons of the South", and the SAA entered the entire province, accompanied by RMP units composed of Chechens.

The GoS have violated this agreement from day one, as it bombed several villages⁵ covered by the agreement in retaliation against its people. Widespread looting of citizens' properties took place under the watchful eyes of the Russian guarantor, with homes, cultivated lands, and public facilities ransacked in broad daylight. The GoS forces launched a large-scale crackdown against the population, and arrested people including important civilian and military figures who sought to protect the population in the south from further violence and destruction.

The number of those arrested according to our count had reached 634 people in the first year after the agreement, including important political and military figures such as Pilot Brigadier General Musa al-Zoubi and Ihab al-Muqbil. Of these, 166 were released. Nine prisoners died under

⁵ Umm al-Mayaden.

torture, including Ayed al-Khalidi and Ghanim al-Jamous. The security authorities opposed all civil and humanitarian attempts to rehabilitate and reconstruct the areas, and blocked all humanitarian aid that reached the Jordanian borders. To add insult to injury, the IRGC-run foreign militias returned to the region in different forms, contrary to the agreement.

The Russian side sought to calm the situation, especially since the most important rebel group in Busra al-Sham joined the Fifth Corps and played a decisive role in eliminating Islamic State (IS) in the Death Valley in the south, but to no avail. Some of the detainees were released due to the Russian efforts, but Russia failed to stop the arbitrary practices of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate (AFID) and the Fourth Division led by Maher al-Assad.

Despite the fact that neither the AFID nor the Fourth Division opposed the Daraa reconciliations publicly, they both considered it unwelcome. According to their views, the reconciliation agreement puts an end to Syrian security services' domination in the South. Both agencies carried out provocative actions against the people, such as attempts to reinstate Assad statues, preventing students from sitting university exams, opening fire on citizens in many peaceful popular protests, and keeping public services at a very low level, as institutions that were outside the control of the GoS remained destroyed. The GoS was determined to show its presence and raise its flag in Daraa whatever the cost.

Systematic Attempts to Strike Self-Governance:

Under such hostile circumstances, maintaining local service provision was a daily struggle. Local councils stopped providing services because Syrian security services did not recognize them and therefore did not compensate their work, including the removal of garbage and rubble, rehabilitation of infrastructure, including maintenance of water networks, securing or repairing electricity, and destroyed housing. Medical services were limited to the Izraa national hospital and Daraa national hospital, and all medical services that were operating during the opposition's control of the region were abolished. Popular attempts to restore schools were obstructed, and barriers were set up to collect financial resources and intimidate citizens.

The draconian security policies have left the people of Daraa with just two options: remain silent or resist. No doubt the inhabitants of Houran region, who used the slogan "death but no humiliation," will not capitulate and accept these infringements on their rights. Peaceful resistance started again. According to the documentation of the Ahrar Houran Association and Houran Forum for Citizenship, 87 peaceful protests have been monitored in dozens of towns and cities in Daraa since the settlement agreements. These events called for the release of all 4,500 detainees from the Daraa Governorate, the expulsion of the IRGC-run foreign militias, and the lifting of the security

grip, as well as demands to bring down the government. They also succeeded in averting attempts to provoke sectarian discord between the Druz of Jabal al-Arab and the Sunni of Hauran.⁶

To overcome the dire living situation, the people of Daraa formed local committees to run their day-to-day affairs as much as possible away from the security services. However, the security officials felt that their return to the south did not constitute a return to their security dominance in Daraa before 2011, and they resorted to several means to reassert their control, including the assassination of three personnel in the Central Committee (CC) and the wounding of four others. IRGC-run militias also participated in organizing several ambushes against the fighters of the Fifth Corps (where the former rebel groups were incorporated). In the second half of September 2018, the Iranian-led militias attempted to assassinate one of the reconciliation leaders, Ahmed al-Awda, and his deputy, Ali Pasha al-Muqdad in a coordinated attack by the GoS security forces on the city of Busra al-Sham. This series of hostile attacks on the people and cities of Daraa came in the context of a sectarian provocation with Sweida Governorate.⁷

Suppression, resistance, and escalation:

The Daraa rebels had little confidence in the GoS. From the first weeks of the agreement, many fighters feared that the security authorities would not respect it, and their suspicions were borne out by the crackdown of arrests launched by the security services coupled with the daily harassment of people and their livelihoods, hindering the possibility of returning to a normal life in Daraa. A number of youths organized decentralized groups that carried out several spontaneous military operations, most of which took place under what they called popular resistance, in response to the arrests, attacks, and thefts by the security services. The security authorities responded with more arrests and assassinations, which served to exacerbate the chaos.

The security response to the instability in Daraa was consolidated by appointing new officers with hostile views towards the region.⁸ From testimonies collected by Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), it seems that the new team does not go beyond changing the snake's skin. These new officers include General Luqa, who believes in the virtue of security handling of problems, and Ghassan Ismail, who was Jamil Hassan's⁹ right arm, whose two brothers died in the SAA's battles with the armed opposition, and whose third brother, Brigadier General Samer

⁶ This is against the plotting of the Syrian Republic Guard (SRG), in striking at and limiting the Eighth Brigade through repeated skirmishes of attrition between the two sides.

⁷ The attack came from the town of al-Qraya, taking advantage of a dispute between the people of al-Qraya and the Fifth Corps over dirt mounds erected in an area considered by the residents to belong to the Sweida Governorate.

⁸ The security leadership in Damascus, through a presidential decree, sacked Major General Qahtan Khalil, and appointed Major General Hussam Muhammad Luqa, as head of what was called the Security Group. The Security Group included Major General Ghassan Jawdat Ismail, successor of Jamil Hassan in the AFID, Colonel Luay al-Ali, head of the Military Intelligence Directorate in Daraa and Sweida, and Major General Kifah Melhem, director of the Military Intelligence Division.

⁹ The director of AIFD.

Ismail, is a judge in Terrorism Court. They were part of the Special Tasks Branch, which is responsible for the disappearance of thousands of civilians, the suppression of the demonstrators, and the killing of a number of detainees in the Mezze Military Prison.

It has been reported that Luay al-Ali personally assassinated a number of peaceful movement figures, including Maen al-Oudat. Major General Kifah Melhem, the son of Major General Muhammad Melhem and perpetrator of war crimes, replaced Major General Muhammad Mhalla, who had maintained a good relationship with the Russian side after reconciliations and confronted more than once with the AFID, which had always stood against reconciliations in the south. Although both al-Ali and Melhem are known for their good relations with the Hmeimim base, it seems clear that Melhem is an essential part of the security plan that is based first on assassinations and secondly on crushing attempts to form local military and civilian structures to protect citizens and organize their lives as much as possible.

More than two years after the “settlement” in Daraa, there have been up to 513 assassinations, as well as assassination attempts that have caused the deaths of more than 300 people, and there have been more than 100 detonations of improvised explosive devices, mines and other explosives, which have killed and injured at least 380 civilians, in addition to 125 civilian casualties. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 230 of the regime forces and their militants were killed.

Meetings between the CC in Daraa and the security leaders have not resulted in any of the popular demands being met. In fact, there have been assassination attempts on nine of the CC members, three of whom were killed and four wounded, attempts to strike at the “Fifth Corps” and many assassination attempts on its leaders, as well as the military besiegement.

Russian failure:

Russia did not keep its promises on either security or humanitarian aspects of the agreement, and exerted little leverage over the AFID and Fourth Division. According to our direct follow-up of the facts, the Russian guarantor failed to intervene in several basic and sensitive cases. During the campaign of arrests, the Russian side was able to intervene occasionally with some security services, such as Military Intelligence, but General Zourin conceded that it was unable to intervene in all AFID attacks. The Russian guarantor was also unable to lift the humanitarian and food blockade imposed on the governorate, despite the pledge by Syrian businessmen from Daraa to send in humanitarian aid, or to protect civilian initiatives to restore schools and hospitals.

The guarantor has also not been able to prevent IRGC-run foreign militias from leaving north of Daraa. Russia has also not met the popular demand to allow the youth to join the Fifth Corps

voluntarily as an alternative to the compulsory military service. The Russian military officials in charge of the Daraa situation have been changed several times, which has diminished popular trust in Russia's commitments.

A glimmer of hope:

In this dark time, there are glimmers of light from the local civil movement who considered reconciliations a non-violent means for a temporary management of the situation while awaiting a final solution for the entire Syrian territories. In order to contribute to this, the CC, national committees, and non-governmental organizations set specific and clear goals, the most important of which are:

- 1) The release of all detainees and kidnapped persons and a halt of the security persecution against the people of the province.
- 2) Lifting the hand of the security services from interfering and attacking the dignity and freedom of people, and exposing the policy of assassinations and arrests. In addition, the deportation of all those whose hands are contaminated with blood and corruption from the province.
- 3) Organizing relief operations for all those who left their homes inside or outside the region, especially women and children.
- 4) Striving to secure the necessary medical aid for every disabled or sick person in the cities, villages, and camps.
- 5) Rebuilding schools and restoring whatever possible to ensure the right to education for our children.
- 6) Organizing healthcare for the people of the region and asking doctors and medical personnel abroad to volunteer to achieve this noble goal.
- 7) Establishing free vocational education courses by means of videoconferencing with youth within the governorate and in the camps, as well as practical courses where possible.
- 8) Organizing academic military courses, by an elite of academic officers, for those who participated in the fighting in the moderate factions and participated in the international negotiations, as an important part in the process of building the Syrian National Army, which was supposed to guard the unity of the country and the sovereignty of the state. In addition, considering the Eighth Brigade the nucleus of this project, and providing financial and logistical assistance to enable it to accept hundred applications of volunteers.
- 9) Securing scholarships for higher cadres to compensate the loss of cadres and expertise that the governorate and Syria as a whole have suffered.

10) Organizing voluntary social work to rebuild and restore as many homes as possible, as well as create decent jobs for youth.

A Way Out:

Relaxing the grip of the security authorities and empowering citizens by providing the basics of a decent living, education, and work would be the real basis for guaranteeing the future of the province. The destruction and losses in infrastructure and the decline in job opportunities have been severe, so a rational and responsible plan for rebuilding and restructuring is vital to prevent the youth, who are just emerging from years of violence, from returning to it in revolt against the authorities' oppressive policies, the absence of opportunities for a decent life, or the security authorities' attempts to close any door of hope.

Supporting the multifaceted civil movement in Daraa is an attempt to save what can be saved from an entire generation who have paid dearly for the painful events that the country went through. In addition, it is important to end the Iranian influence and presence in the entire province, and to build bridges of trust and love with those who actually want to help the Syrian citizens. Finally, it should be noted that there **is a third option**, a civil and developmental one, that is capable of resisting dictatorship, leading to forcing the regime and its security apparatus to respect United Nations' resolutions, which would pave the way to the end of dictatorship throughout the country.