



**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (15)

***Partial Local Autonomy in Southern Syria: Conditions, Durability, and Replicability***

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## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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In July 2018, Daraa Governorate, once home to an array of rebel groups and local governance councils, supported by significant international assistance, was partially recaptured by the Government of Syria (GoS). Through a combination of force and negotiations, the GoS has restored control over key routes and infrastructure, although a number of former rebel groups have retained limited autonomy in their own communities. Since then, poor security and economic conditions, inadequate services, and competition between and among GoS security actors and former opposition factions have challenged the status quo in Daraa, but, by and large, the situation has held.

These negotiated outcomes – and the GoS’s willingness to accept them – were predicated upon multiple factors, including the relatively moderate nature of southern opposition factions, Russian and Israeli military postures, and the historical connections of the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID) in Daraa. While lessons learned from the south are important, the particular conditions and outcomes in Daraa are not likely to be replicable elsewhere in Syria.

### **Conditions for Local Autonomy in the South**

The drawdown of US assistance throughout early 2018 upon which communities in the south had relied heavily, and Jordan’s refusal to allow opposition factions to use its territory as a staging ground for counterattacks, left opposition factions in Daraa vulnerable to GoS advances. The US Embassy in Amman made the southern faction leaders’ isolation explicitly clear in a 19 June WhatsApp message: “You should not base your decision [on negotiating or surrendering] on the assumption or expectation of military intervention by us.”

Why then was the GoS open to negotiated outcomes in which these factions retained a degree of local autonomy? Key figures and negotiators from both sides were critical in reaching settlements, but there were also broader factors that created these unique conditions in southern Syria.

#### Limited Threat from Opposition Factions

First, opposition factions in the south presented less of a threat to the GoS and its core interests than those in Syria’s other major opposition stronghold in the northwest. In large part due to pressure from the US-led Military Operations Center (MOC) and from Jordan – the latter wanting to retain relatively amicable relations and trade with the GoS – these factions were less extreme and less militarily effective than formations elsewhere, and had made no significant attempts to capture the GoS-held Daraa al-Mahata or other critical areas. For the most part, they were far more focused on defending and providing for local communities in the Houran region than on any

significant offensive action against the GoS – save for a summer 2017 offensive in which factions fought to take control of the sparsely populated Manshiyat area in western Daraa al-Balad.

By taking a relatively more amenable position towards the GoS than their counterparts in the northwest, factions in the south were seen by Damascus as being more suitable partners to incorporate into its security structures and negotiate access, enabling a limited return of the GoS to opposition areas and restored GoS control over both the Nassib border crossing with Jordan and the M5 international highway connecting it to Damascus.

### Russian and Israeli Military Postures

Critical to the GoS's engaging in negotiations were Russia and Israel's own postures towards military activity in the south. Russia certainly conducted its own air strikes in this territory, but, as it prioritised international negotiations and de-escalation agreements that elevated its own international status, it was unwilling to commit to a significant and sustained military campaign that would have enabled the GoS to take territory in southern Syria solely by force. Failing this, the GoS would have needed to rely upon significant support from Iranian-backed militias to take territory on the ground. This would have resulted in major casualties among GoS forces and, perhaps more concerning for Damascus, a harsh response from Israel.

For its part, Israel had clearly and repeatedly demonstrated willingness and capacity to strike not only Iranian targets but also Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and GoS intelligence targets in the south and elsewhere in Syria if militias backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) approached the Israeli border. The harshest of these assaults was on 10 May 2018, when Israel struck around 70 sites across the country, killing SAA soldiers, pro-government militia fighters, and Iranian targets alike. Any military operations required to capture territory in Daraa by force would have risked an escalation in which Israel may well have significantly crippled critical elements of the GoS's security apparatus. Negotiated settlements and partial autonomy were more appealing to Damascus than more significant Israeli attacks.

### Historical Connections on the Ground

The connections that the MID had developed and maintained with communities in Daraa – particularly those that Brigadier General Luay al-Ali made as the head of the MID's Daraa branch prior to the conflict – were also critical to negotiations. In 2018, amid ongoing GoS and Russian attacks on Daraa, al-Ali, now head of the MID for southern Syria, could make deals with key clans and families to meet their interests, or at least create the appearance that he was capable of doing so. The MID could present itself as the best of the bad options for local communities, preferable to a forcible takeover by the Tiger Forces, IRGC-backed militias, or the Fourth Division.

Alongside the softer approach, the MID still used coercion and the threat of force to accomplish its objectives in the south – facilitated by its historical connections and visibility. Balancing co-optation and coercion, al-Ali, with Russia’s support, was better positioned to convince clans and families to pressure faction leaders to negotiate and align themselves with the MID and Russia.

### Congruence of Factors

This combination of factors produced an environment in the south favourable to negotiated settlements. Because the opposition was not a significant threat to Damascus, the south was protected to some degree by Russian and Israeli postures, and GoS security actors had sufficient connections and relationships to form the basis of cross-conflict cooperation, the GoS was more inclined to seek reconciliation than to risk a prolonged and costly military campaign and more significant Israeli strikes. With this, a number of population centres in Daraa remained in the hands of local factions with limited entry by GoS security actors.

### **Durability of the Current Environment**

While more significant repercussions of a military campaign were averted, security conditions in southern Syria have become increasingly precarious since summer 2018. The MID and Russia have attempted to restore the institution’s pre-war dominance in the south by working with amenable rebel groups. As well as putting their own personnel on the ground, the MID and Russia recruited fighters into the Fifth Corps under former Shabab al-Sunnah leader Ahmed al-Odeh. While this formation was initially intended to encompass a much wider array of former opposition factions, key figures such as Abu Murshid Baradan in Tafas and others in Nawa, Jasim, and other areas in western Daraa refused to fall under al-Odeh’s leadership. Nonetheless, the MID and Russia have worked with some of these other factions.

In competition with the MID and Russia, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate (AFID), the Fourth Division – both cooperating with Iran and the IRGC-backed militias – and others have emerged as rival contenders. Despite not having significant historical presence in the south, these actors have sought to expand their influence by also recruiting and cooperating with former opposition fighters and factions, promising to settle their statuses with the GoS, issue security cards, and provide salaries. Some GoS/SAA actors – particularly the Fourth Division – have also interfered with and harassed reconciled factions that are aligned with their competitors. Prominent examples of this include, but are not limited to, incidents in which the Fourth Division has targeted reconciled faction leaders and members of the Daraa Central Negotiations Committee (CNC) at checkpoints in western Daraa countryside, and in which the Fourth Division and its allies forcibly

took control of the northern gate of the Nassib border crossing from the MID-aligned Abu Zureiq's militia in March 2020.

In recent months, tensions between the Fourth Division and the Fifth Corps have escalated significantly. The Fourth Division has expanded its presence in western Daraa countryside, sending substantial reinforcements and establishing new checkpoints between population centres. For its part, the Fifth Corps has found itself among an array of former opposition factions that have been harassed by the Fourth Division, AFID, and other GoS-aligned security actors, and targeted by assassination attempts, raids, small-arms attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and other threats from local rivals and unknown actors. On 20 June, perhaps the most significant of these attacks was an IED targeting a Fifth Corps bus transporting fighters near Kahil, which killed and wounded dozens of fighters. On 29 September, a failed attempt by rival Sweida factions to attack Fifth Corps positions north and east of Busra al-Sham reportedly resulted in at least 15 fatalities from the Sweida factions and one casualty from the Fifth Corps, with dozens wounded. Many have perceived the 29 September attack on the Fifth Corps as being orchestrated or supported by Iran or Hezbollah, but details remain murky.

Facing continued threats, on 23 June, Ahmed al-Odeh pledged to unify former factions across southern Syria under the Fifth Corps umbrella; however, progress on this has been limited. On 3 September, the Fifth Corps reportedly inducted 460 new fighters, but reports indicate delays in both provision of salaries and the issuance of security identification cards. Moreover, attempts to expand the Fifth Corps have led to their own tensions and clashes. Most notably on 6 September, when the defection of 50 fighters from the SAA's 112th Brigade to the Fifth Corps in Quneitra resulted in clashes between the Fifth Corps and its own MID benefactors.

These tensions and escalations come against a backdrop of generally poor security conditions, with areas across southern Syria seeing continued assassination attempts, clashes with small-arms fire, and IED attacks. The majority of these attacks have been perpetrated by unknown actors, and have targeted reconciled opposition factions, GoS security actors, and civilians. Poor economic conditions have also been pervasive, even before Syria's most recent economic crisis in late 2019 and 2020. Moreover, the GoS has failed to meet the gap in services that resulted from the shutdown of international cross-border assistance, all of which have contributed to shared local grievances with the GoS's approach to the south.

Some have interpreted these factors as a precursor to either a new uprising or a new major GoS offensive against communities still under former rebel groups. However, under the current dynamics, neither is likely. While the south has seen renewed protests and demonstrations – mostly

in late 2019 and early 2020 – the significant majority of these incidents occurred in communities and areas in which GoS presence is limited or nearly non-existent. While it is an important indicator of shared grievances in southern Syria, this does not demonstrate a capacity or willingness by populations to rise up directly against the GoS as they did in 2011.

As for a military campaign, a number of observers fear that the GoS forcibly recapturing the small opposition pocket in al-Sanamayn city in March 2020 and threatening to attack Jassim in subsequent months are a prelude to new offensives in Tafas, Busra al-Sham, Nawa, Jassim, and elsewhere in southern Syria. While tensions in these areas have escalated, any significant GoS campaign would still be hard fought. Unlike al-Sanamayn, which only housed a few dozen fighters, these areas are each home to hundreds of fighters if not more, many of whom have retained their heavy weaponry from earlier in the conflict. The risks of high losses and Israeli strikes if the GoS does launch attacks are likely to deter a major offensive.

### **Replicability in Other Areas in Syria**

The approach taken in southern Syria – one in which the GoS and rebel groups negotiate arrangements wherein the former is able to access critical territory and the latter is able to retain local autonomy – is not likely to be replicable in Idlib Governorate and the surrounding areas. Likewise, in the northeast, significant local autonomy is likely to persist as long as the United States maintains its presence; however, if the United States withdraws, the GoS is unlikely to allow this autonomy to continue.

#### Local Autonomy under the GoS is Unlikely in Idlib

In Idlib and the surrounding areas, the GoS would be far less likely to allow opposition factions to retain autonomy. First, factions in Idlib are more hardened and extreme than those in the south, and far less amenable to coordination and cooperation with the GoS. This is in large part due to Turkey's far more permissive approach to borders and movement of fighters in the north compared to Jordan's strict policies in the south. This is also exacerbated by the fact that in nearly all territory the GoS recaptured across western Syria it sent hardline fighters who it considered to be "irreconcilable" to Idlib. Moreover, the GoS's key priority in northwestern Syria – the M4 international highway that connects the Latakia and Tartous ports to the industrial centre of Aleppo – is of far more importance to the GoS than infrastructure in the south.

While the GoS is not likely to negotiate autonomy with local armed factions in the northwest, this does not necessarily mean it will be inclined or able to dispense with them in a drawn-out military campaign. It is quite possible that, once the GoS takes control of the M4 highway, the

remainder of Idlib Governorate will become a hinterland – leaving Turkey to contain HTS and other factions, rather than expending its own resources to this end.

### Prospects for Local Autonomy in the Northeast

If current dynamics persist in the northeast – that is, if the United States continues to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and tacitly allows the SDF and its allies to continue some level of coordination with the GoS on oil and wheat sales – the GoS will be less inclined to challenge the SDF's autonomy and will instead maintain cooperative, yet contentious relations.

If, instead, the United States withdraws further, the GoS may initially cooperate with the SDF to prevent a collapse of security and governance in areas that are particularly difficult to manage, but in the long run it would be less inclined to allow a rival security apparatus to maintain control over a significant portion of the country. The GoS would be likely to first prioritise taking full control over key resources and revenue generators – namely oil fields and infrastructure such as the Tabqa dam – after which it would face less difficulty in dismantling the SDF. Moreover, the GoS may well attempt to dismantle the SDF as a quid pro quo with Turkey, in exchange for Turkey turning over control of the opposition-held portion of the M4 highway in the northwest. In the event of a US withdrawal, ironically, the SDF, significantly larger and better equipped than factions in the south, may have less success in maintaining their autonomy.

### **Conclusion**

The efforts of key negotiators and actors on the ground were indeed vital for reaching agreements between GoS actors and former opposition factions and partial local autonomy in Daraa, but broader factors, some of which were relatively unique to the south, are also critical. An array of factors – the position of southern opposition factions, Russia's reluctance to engage in a sustained military campaign, Israel's demonstrated capacity and willingness to incur significant casualties and damage to the GoS, and historical relations and connections between the MID and communities throughout southern Syria – made negotiations and settlements the path of least resistance for most parties. Since then, while security and economic conditions in the south remain poor, basic needs remain unmet, and competition among GoS security actors is expanding, Daraa seems to have remained stable enough to satisfy Damascus.

The prospects for similar negotiations and arrangements between the GoS and local armed factions elsewhere in Syria are less promising. Facing more extreme factions in the northwest, and with more significant interests in both the northwest and the northeast, the GoS is less likely to compromise and allow significant autonomy.