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Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

Table of Contents

Principal Findings

What's new? When the Syrian regime retook the south from rebels in mid-2018, Russian mediation limited the violence. Six months later, security and living conditions remain precarious; the regime has re-established authoritarian rule; and Iran-aligned groups may be trying to establish a presence near the armistice line with Israel.

Why does it matter? The regime is determined to reclaim remaining areas of Syria outside its control. Negotiated solutions may avoid further bloodshed but require far better conditions to enable safe refugee returns and reconstruction. Iran-backed activities near the Golan Heights could become triggers for an escalation with Israel.

What should be done? International actors should demand better humanitarian access to the south and not encourage refugee returns until conditions improve. Russia should provide better security guarantees to people in areas that revert from rebel to state control. Countries with influence over Iran and Israel should work with both to prevent inadvertent escalation.

International Crisis Group
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Executive Summary

In July 2018, with the help of Russia, the Syrian regime retook the country's south, where the popular uprising was born seven years earlier. State institutions, including security agencies, returned, and the population – civilians and defeated rebels – had to adjust. Six months later, recovery is moving at a snail's pace; Russia is doing nothing to prevent the regime's reversion to repressive rule; and Iran-aligned fighters reportedly are establishing a presence inside state security forces, raising the risk of Israeli intervention. Russia – urged by Western countries – should press Damascus to improve humanitarian access and conditions for safe refugee return, which Moscow purportedly supports. Russia and Western countries enjoying relations with Iran should try to dissuade Tehran from moving its proxies into the area. The south's experience also carries lessons for the rest of the country: it suggests that negotiated solutions for areas still outside regime control will require more extensive involvement of external actors to prevent regime reprisals, enable aid to reach vulnerable populations and allow safe refugee returns.

The regime's reconquest of the south was faster and less destructive than previous offensives against rebel strongholds. An important reason was that rebel commanders in many locations opted to accept Russia-mediated surrender deals (*taswiyat*) that returned areas they controlled to the Syrian government's nominal authority, and enabled fighters to keep their light weapons and undergo a vetting process that would take them off security agencies' wanted lists. Russia said it would guarantee these agreements by deploying its military police, as it has since done.

At first, the southern agreements looked moderately successful: people displaced by the fighting returned in short order and many rebels joined the Syrian army's 5th Corps, sponsored by Russia, ostensibly to fight the Islamic State (ISIS) in nearby areas. Yet a closer look six months later reveals a more complex picture.

Two principal factors discourage refugees and the displaced from returning. The first is the glaring lack of functioning infrastructure, services and employment. Roads are open and supplies are coming in. Yet the state's return also meant the end of cross-border assistance from Jordan, which the regime rejected as an infringement on its sovereignty. Medical and educational services that had been supported by international organisations operating out of Amman stopped. Thousands of southerners employed by NGOs running the cross-border response lost their jobs. Though aid provided by Damascus-based humanitarian groups has closed the gap somewhat, the regime's restrictions on international aid access to the south have limited the type and quality of assistance to the area's poorest and most vulnerable. Post-conflict recovery of critical infrastructure is halting, uneven and clearly insufficient.

The second factor is the evolving security situation. Upon its return, the regime arrested hundreds of formally cleared rebels and civilians with a track record of unarmed opposition activity, marking the reappearance of unaccountable security agencies. The Russian presence has somewhat mitigated the latter's behaviour, but not knowing how long that engagement will last, people are anxious about the future. Moreover, residents of the south report a covert presence of Iran-aligned fighters in

state security forces, which suggests that the area could become yet another flashpoint in the confrontation between Iran and Israel in Syria.

As long as the situation in the south does not improve significantly, refugees and the internally displaced will not return in substantial numbers, fearing joblessness, homelessness and arbitrary arrest. Opposition forces in other parts of Syria remaining outside regime control, such as the Turkish-controlled Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas further north, and the north east, held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, are watching. What they see is a cautionary tale. Negotiating a return of the state to the north and north east with Turkey and Kurdish forces, respectively, will require more solid guarantees of what would follow, and potentially a more extensive role for external actors than what Russia has provided in previous agreements. In the meantime, pushing for better humanitarian access would be the best way to alleviate the plight of the people in the south.

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Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South

I. Introduction

Daraa, the "cradle of the revolution" that broke out in Syria in 2011, has seen several rounds of fierce fighting during the country's subsequent civil war. In 2017, Russia, the U.S. and Jordan designated the rebel-held parts of Daraa province and adjacent Quneitra province a "de-escalation zone", one of four such areas, which were supposed to see a cessation of hostilities and more open humanitarian access.[1] The war's tide turned in the regime's favour, however, and between February and April 2018 it overpowered rebels in the eastern Ghouta de-escalation zone in a bloody offensive. Rebels in the northern Homs de-escalation zone agreed to a negotiated surrender shortly afterward. In mid-June, the regime massed its forces around the jagged edges of rebel-held areas in the south, two fingers of land to the east and west of Daraa city. The rapid build-up, accompanied by heightened bellicose rhetoric from the regime and its Russian ally, suggested that Daraa and environs would be the next conquest.[2]

In late June, fighting escalated in Daraa's north-eastern corner.[3] On 23 June, Russian aircraft began bombing targets there in support of regime forces shelling rebel positions.[4] That night, the U.S. embassy in Jordan signalled to southern rebels that they were on their own, saying via WhatsApp: "You should not base your decision on the assumption or expectation of military intervention by us".[5] Soon afterward, amid intensified Russian bombing, the regime's offensive began in earnest. International organisations warned of an impending humanitarian catastrophe along the lines of the assaults upon eastern Ghouta and east Aleppo.[6] Such grim predictions seemed borne out at first; in early July, the UN reported that 270,000 people, roughly one third of the local population, were displaced.[7]

[1] The four de-escalation zones (southern Syria, the East Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, the northern Homs countryside, Idlib province and adjacent areas) were declared by Turkey, Russia and Iran in the Kazakh capital Astana on 4 May 2017. Russia, Jordan and the U.S. separately negotiated the terms of the southern de-escalation zone, announcing them after a meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Hamburg on 7 July 2017. For details, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°187, *Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria,* 21 June 2018.

[2] "Syria rebels dig in for Daraa fight", France 24, 25 April 2018.

[3] "Regime starts aerial bombing of eastern Daraa countryside", *Enab Baladi*, 19 June 2018 (Arabic).

[4] "Russian aircraft begin bombing Daraa", *Enab Baladi*, 23 June 2018 (Arabic).

[5] Crisis Group interview, member of opposition-run local governing body, via messaging app, 23 June 2018. The message is available in a tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 12:48pm, 23 June 2018. Official U.S. statements in the run-up to the offensive seemed to threaten unspecified action to defend the de-escalation zone. See "Assad Regime Intentions in the Southwest De-escalation Zone", U.S. Department of State, 25 May 2018; "Preserving the Southwest De-escalation Zone in Syria", U.S. Department of State, 14 June 2018.

[6] "CARE Warns Against Another Humanitarian Catastrophe in Southern Syria as Fighting Intensifies", CARE, 27 June 2018.

[7] "Syria war: 270,000 displaced by fighting in south-west", BBC, 2 July 2018.

Yet, as the regime advanced southward through the Daraa countryside to the Jordanian border, the fighting paused to allow negotiations between, on one side, Russia and the regime and, on the other, the local rebels, encouraged by Jordan.[8] Meeting in the town of Busra al-Sham some 40km to the east of Daraa, the two sides reached an agreement on 1 July for a Russian-guaranteed negotiated surrender. The agreement stipulated the peaceful return of Syrian state institutions and allowed southerners to "resolve their [legal] status" (*taswiyat al-wadaa*), a reference to a vetting process run by the regime's security agencies.[9] It also gave rebel fighters the opportunity to join the Syrian army's Russian-sponsored 5th Corps.[10]

After the deal was signed, however, nearly all the rebel signatories withdrew from it, and fighting resumed.[11] Only Busra al-Sham rebel strongman Ahmed al-Oudeh held to the agreement, sparing his area renewed bombing.[12] Supported by Russian aerial attacks, the regime slowly pushed the other eastern rebels toward the Jordanian border. On 6 July, they reached a second agreement, whose provisions, in addition to

[8] Crisis Group interview, Western diplomats, June 2018.

[9] The formal process known as "resolving status" typically involves interrogation about previous opposition activities (such as participating in protests, relief work in rebel-held areas or fighting with rebels), many of which fall under the regime's expansive definition of "terrorism", and a pledge to abstain from these in the future. Thereafter, the individual receives a clearance paper and the security agencies supposedly remove him/her from their lists of wanted persons. "Resolving status: a new nightmare for the residents of the areas surrounding Damascus", Al Jazeera, 17 June 2018 (Arabic); and Haid Haid, "The Details of 'Reconciliation Deals' Expose How They Are Anything But", Chatham House, August 2018. Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, late December 2018. In Daraa, the process was apparently fast-tracked initially. According to Abdullah al-Jabassini, who bases his account on interviews with locals who underwent the process, "Governmental convoys associated with the MID [Military Intelligence Directorate] would enter Daraa hamlets for about three days. Individuals who had previously demonstrated their disloyalty to Syrian authorities in ways such as attending demonstrations, evading military service, defecting or joining a rebel group were given an opportunity to 'reconcile their status'. Those who wished to do so were to approach the convoy's headquarters with a personal photo and an ID card. An officer responsible for filling in a 12-question form was to ask about one's activities and relations with rebels since 2011, then request the respondent to sign a 'pledge document' in which he or she 'vows not to carry out any activities that harm the internal or the external security of the Syrian Arab Republic'. The individual would return in a period of five to ten days to obtain a form signed and stamped by the head of the MID. The form was to indicate that one's name had been removed from an official state list of wanted people and allow the bearer to move through checkpoints without being harassed or arrested". Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations", European University Institute, January 2019. According to Crisis Group interviews, these convoys, sometimes accompanied by Russian officers, travelled around Daraa between August and September. One reason for this arrangement was that locals feared they might be arrested on their way to larger towns where the authorities had set up fixed settlement offices.

[10] Crisis Group interview, Syrian activist, via messaging app, July 2018. For full agreement terms, see Appendix B.

[11] A rebel leader called the deal "degrading" and said rebels would take "an honourable death over a humiliating one". Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, July 2018.

[12] "Busra al-Sham militants continue handing over their heavy weapons to the army as part of reconciliation process", SANA, 4 July 2018 (Arabic). For Oudeh's frustrated WhatsApp messages to his fellow southern rebels defending his decision, see tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 4:58am, 2 July 2018.

many of the 1 July terms, also included a limited evacuation to Idlib in Syria's rebel-held north for those who declined to "resolve their status".[13]

The 1 and 6 July deals neutralised the south's largest and most potent rebel factions and restored regime control over the entirety of the rebel-held border with Jordan, except for the jihadist-held Yarmouk river basin.[14] On 6 July, the Syrian army announced it had retaken the Nasib border crossing with Jordan, to the southeast of Daraa city, and raised the Syrian flag.[15]

From there, the regime and Russia proceeded west, concluding a patchwork of local agreements, some negotiated by Russia and the regime in partnership and some by the regime alone. The regime's advance prompted another wave of displacement.[16] The details of the western countryside deals differed, but all seem similar to the 1 July and 6 July agreements.[17] By the end of July, the entire rebel-held countryside had surrendered.[18] In late July, regime forces and former rebels who had joined them trained their fire on the Yarmouk valley in Daraa's south-western corner, held by a local ISIS affiliate.[19] On 1 August, the regime announced it had retaken the last ISIS-held town in the valley.[20]

The regime transferred some southern rebels and their families to the rebel-held north on the basis of the 6 July agreement, but the numbers were smaller than from other reconquered areas on previous occasions.[21] In negotiations, Russian represent-

[13] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, via messaging app, July 2018. For full agreement terms, see Appendix C. For rebels' admission of defeat, see tweet by Central Operations [Room] in the South, @southoperations, 6 July 2018. (This Twitter account is no longer operative.)

[14] "Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida Situation Report No. 2 as of 11 July 2018", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 11 July 2018.

[15] "Nation's flag raised at Nasib border crossing", Ministry of Defence of the Syrian Arab Republic, 6 July 2018 (Arabic).

[16] "Syrian Arab Republic: Dar'a, Quneitra, As-Sweida Situation Report No. 3 as of 11 July 2018", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 19 July 2018; "Syrian village of Nawa surrenders after army pounding", Reuters, 18 July 2019. The OCHA report estimated that 140,000 people were displaced in western Daraa and Quneitra. Some 16,000 moved near the armistice line on the Golan, hoping that the combination of the demilitarised zone and the proximity of Israeli forces would provide protection. "Syrians waving white flags turned away from Israeli border as they flee regime offensive", *The Telegraph,* 17 July 2018.

[17] For an overview, see "Daraa: Individual agreements with unclear terms", *Al-Modon*, 17 July 2018 (Arabic).

[18] Ibid.

[19] "'Reconciled' groups fight alongside regime in Yarmouk basin", *Enab Baladi*, 23 July 2018 (Arabic). The Yarmouk basin rebel faction Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk and two smaller jihadist groups merged in May 2016 to form Jaysh Khaled ibn al-Walid. It was widely assumed to be affiliated with ISIS, but ISIS only affirmed that relationship publicly shortly before the group's demise in 2018.

[20] "Army liberates village of al-Quseir, last Daesh terrorist stronghold in Yarmouk basin in Daraa countryside", SANA, 1 August 2018 (Arabic). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, regime forces, including reconciled rebels, executed a number of surviving ISIS fighters in the aftermath. "Mass executions carried out by the regime forces and the 'reconciliation factions' in Yarmouk basin", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 31 August 2018, www.syriahr.com/en/?p=99230. A smuggler claimed that several hundred ISIS fighters escaped to ISIS-held territory east of Sweida with his peers' help. Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.

[21] A humanitarian worker in Amman said: "In the south, not many people went [north]. It wasn't 15 per cent of the population, like in East Ghouta. It was 7,000 people, out of 780,000, which is nothing". Crisis Group interview, late October 2018. Another source, based on interviews with local ac-

atives reportedly discouraged rebels from leaving for Idlib, which they said would be attacked later in the year.[22] For the majority, the option to integrate into regime forces, in particular the Russian-sponsored 5th Corps, under terms guaranteed by the Russians, appears to have been more attractive.[23] A former rebel fighter said:

> These are our lands and hometowns. We are original residents here but in Idlib we will be displaced people or become refugees in Turkey and turned into [Turkey's] fighters. It is better to fight under Russian command and stay on our lands.[24]

This report looks at developments in the south in the aftermath of the regime takeover. As time has progressed, the regime has restricted outsiders' access to the area, and international assistance has ended, greatly reducing available information. Representatives of aid organisations report that many of their previous partners have gone silent for fear of regime surveillance and reprisals. Thus, information from these sources, which was mostly gathered in Amman in October 2018, could cover only the initial phase of the state's return to the area. Syrian opposition networks, many also based in Amman, remain a major source of information, yet it is often difficult to verify their accounts. To obtain a more differentiated and granular picture, Crisis Group conducted two extensive rounds of remote interviews, in mid-October and late December, with around 50 individuals, the majority of whom are living in the south, while around one fifth are residents of Damascus originally from the south.

tivists in November 2018, estimated the number of the evacuated at 15,000, among them 5,000 fighters and 10,000 civilians. Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa", op. cit.

[22] "Russians to the Free [Syrian Army]: Don't go to Idlib; the battle there will begin", SMART News, 10 July 2018 (Arabic).

[23] Grigory Lukyanov and Ruslan Mamedov, "The Fifth Assault Corps: Back to Order in Syria?", Russian International Affairs Council, 16 June 2017.

[24] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.

II. The Mixed Blessing of Reintegration

As the Syrian state retook control, it reopened the roads to traffic and trade to and from the south. Since then, southern merchants no longer need to bring in supplies from inside Syria through extortionate checkpoints or smuggling routes.[25] Accordingly, prices of staple goods fell dramatically, largely to the same level as in the rest of government-controlled Syria. For instance, the price for a cylinder of cooking gas, which stood at around 25,000 Syrian pounds (approximately $50) in June, plummeted to about 7,000 pounds (approximately $15) in October, after the fighting had ended, a 70 per cent drop.[26]

Not everyone benefited from the reduced prices, however, and many have been struggling to make ends meet. Since the regime retook the area, it has cut humanitarian and "stabilisation" aid from Jordan-based organisations because it rejects cross-border assistance as an infringement on its sovereignty.[27] The aid cuts affect the south's most vulnerable in particular, including those who used to rely on medical care and other assistance provided by international aid organisations based in Amman.[28]

In addition, thousands used to receive monthly salaries of $200-300 from parallel institutions built by the opposition to compensate for the state's absence (such as health centres and field hospitals, schools, White Helmets civil defence units, police and local councils) or non-governmental organisations (often tasked with aid delivery), most of which received funding from external donors. Many of these people are now jobless; careful to hide their past employment from the regime's security agencies, they have broken off contact with former donors.[29] There are also reports that upon its return the regime fired a significant number of public employees who had continued to serve and collect government salaries under rebel rule.[30]

Some find work in agriculture, a sector that remains functional, if hamstrung; developing its economic potential would require reliable supplies of water and electricity, which are now unavailable, and investments of a scale that few locals or potential returnees could mobilise.[31] The lack of options drives many young men to enlist in

[25] In addition to assistance coming from Jordan, rebel areas received supplies via smuggling networks at steep markups. Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, May 2018.
[26] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.
[27] "Stabilisation" aid is development-style assistance in a conflict or post-conflict context intended to reduce conflict drivers and, by strengthening local institutional capacity, establish conditions for lasting peace and stability. In Syria, foreign stabilisation assistance has included support for governance, municipal services and first responders. For an examination of U.S. stabilisation assistance in Syria, see Michael Ratney, "Post–Conflict Stabilization: What Can We Learn from Syria?" *PRISM*, vol. 7, no. 4, 8 November 2018.
[28] On 9 December 2018, the UN commenced a one-off delivery of humanitarian aid from Jordan to southern Syria, exhausting stocks left in aid organisations' warehouses when they lost access to the area in June. The UN said the delivery, measuring 11,200 tonnes, represented one month's worth of supplies for the area. It was meant to take place over four weeks. "Major UN Aid Delivery to Syria from Jordan", UN OCHA, 9 December 2018.
[29] "Civil society, aid organizations withdraw into the shadows as Syrian government reasserts control", Syria Direct, 8 November 2018.
[30] "Assad regime dismisses thousands of employees in southern Syria", Arabi21, 27 September 2018.
[31] Crisis group interviews, via messaging app, late December 2018.

government forces; they feel bitter at having been abandoned by their outside supporters. A former rebel fighter said:

> We have nothing to do. The only thing I know is to be a fighter. I have been in an armed group for five years. I don't know any job. I am thinking of joining Air Force Intelligence, the 5th Corps or the 4th Division. The Americans, Saudis and Jordanians used us like toilet paper, then threw us into a wastebasket. I want to join the regime's security bodies to protect myself and my family, and to buy bread to feed my children.[32]

The loss of the income that southerners generated through cross-border assistance means that many are now worse off. It also means that an important source of purchasing power in the south, and hence a significant part of the local economy, disappeared overnight.[33] The reopening of the Nasib/Jaber border crossing on 15 October allowed a few local traders to have clients from Jordan, where prices are much higher across the board, yet the benefits are restricted to these traders and their suppliers outside the area.

Meanwhile, after the initial drop when the siege was lifted, additional demand from Jordan has driven prices of some staples back up. An Amman-based humanitarian worker said:

> Having two thousand Jordanians cross into Syria daily to buy Suzuki [pickup]-sized quantities of consumer goods is driving up prices in the south. Diesel is subsidised and price-controlled, but meat is not.[34]

Since then, a nationwide fuel shortage has also driven up the price of diesel, used for heating in the winter. Reopening the Nasib crossing was a milestone in the regime's efforts to normalise its relations with Middle Eastern neighbours, and restored overland access to the Gulf countries through Nasib and other crossings may allow the regime to earn sorely needed hard currency from exports and transit fees.[35] Whether any of these benefits will trickle down to people living in the border area is unclear.

The Syrian government requires that all humanitarian assistance be routed through Damascus. Some aid organisations are attempting to relocate their operations to the

[32] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, late December 2018.

[33] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Amman, late October 2018. See also "Daraa residents 'paralyzed' by economy in recession, collapse of opposition-era civil society and NGO networks", Syria Direct, 29 October.

[34] Crisis Group interview, Amman, late October 2018. See also "Opening of Nasib Border crossing drives up prices for some goods by 5%", *Enab Baladi,* 1 November 2018 (Arabic). The source for the 5 per cent figure is the Damascus Chamber of Commerce; the newspaper's own correspondent reported far more dramatic increases for some essential items, for example 30 per cent for eggs and olive oil and 100 per cent for potatoes. The media is also reporting gas shortages, as Jordanians fill up their tanks at about 40 per cent of the price they are used to back home. "The other side of the border: In southern Syria, promise of Naseeb border rings hollow for civilians mired by rising prices", Syria Direct, 29 November 2018.

[35] Lebanese traders claim that the Syrian authorities raised transit fees for commercial transports significantly compared to the tariffs applied before the crossing's closure in April 2015, for example, from $300 to $800, an increase of nearly 170 per cent, for a 24-tonne truck passing from Lebanon into Jordan. "Border fees impede Lebanese commerce, traders say", *Al-Mashareq*, 26 October 2018.

Syrian capital, but registration with the authorities involves a cumbersome, lengthy bureaucratic process, and many groups that previously provided cross-border assistance are not welcome. Organisations already operating from Damascus, including UN agencies, are finding that Syrian authorities have limited their direct access to the south.

Regular, direct access is critical for good humanitarian practices such as preliminary needs assessments and monitoring and evaluation, which ensure that aid is not diverted to government employees or armed groups. Access is also important for the provision of service-based aid such as medical care, as opposed to goods-based assistance such as food baskets. Instead, international aid organisations and UN agencies have to rely on government-aligned organisations such as the Red Crescent to deliver goods and services on the ground. One Amman-based humanitarian worker said: "When the UN talks about access, they say, 'we delivered', but it's through the Red Crescent. … They haven't been there themselves".[36]

Restrictions do not end there: reportedly, even the Red Crescent faces difficulties in gaining access to some newly recaptured parts of the south, as the security agencies delay required authorisations.[37] Without easier, more regular access, aid to these areas is vulnerable to diversion. Some donor governments have also expressed broader concerns about the integrity of the Red Crescent and government-sanctioned NGOs.[38]

The stabilisation projects and civil institutions set up and maintained with external support were supposed to fill the vacuum left by the state's absence. With Damascus back in control, that vacuum no longer exists. The problem, however, is that while the reconquest halted cross-border assistance abruptly, the return of state institutions and services has been tentative and uneven. Supplies of electricity and drinking water have improved in some areas, but in others, such as the Yarmouk valley, they remain cut off.[39] Overall, and while government agencies can be seen at work across the south, progress is slow.

Government representatives and local Baath officials emphasise that resources are insufficient and urge locals to contribute money and make privately owned trucks and bulldozers available to government departments undertaking public works, under the slogan "cooperation between the government and society".[40] In some towns, residents take the initiative to pool money so that government departments can buy cables, pipes and other hardware to speed up works.[41]

Whether the scarcity of resources is a form of retribution against an area considered the birthplace of the uprising, as many opposition supporters maintain, or a result of the state's degraded capacity after more than six years of war, is difficult to establish. Yet even some local regime supporters express frustration with the lack of resources allocated and the slow pace of recovery, seeing it as an expression of the

[36] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Amman, October 2018.
[37] Crisis Group interview, Syrian Arab Red Crescent employee, via messaging app, late December 2018.
[38] A Western diplomat in Beirut representing a major donor country claimed that "the needs assessments that you get from these NGOs cannot be trusted". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, late October 2018.
[39] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, early November 2018, late December 2018.
[40] Crisis Group interviews, various locations, via messaging app, late December 2018.
[41] Ibid.

central government's habitual neglect for the rural periphery – arguably, the same attitude that primed the area to become the "cradle of the revolution" in 2011.[42]

The medical sector also suffered a serious initial setback.[43] Health centres and field hospitals either shut down or reduced their services when cross-border assistance, which had provided supplies and funded payrolls, stopped. Many medical personnel abandoned their posts.[44] The regime and its Russian ally have systematically targeted health facilities and workers in rebel-held areas throughout the war, and many doctors who remained in these areas may have been involved in anti-regime activism.[45] As a result, many of the medical personnel who abandoned their posts may have done so out of fear of retribution and/or arrest.[46] Yet by the end of the year, the situation appeared to have improved. Partly relying on equipment confiscated from former rebel-run facilities, the Daraa health directorate has reopened the city's public hospital and refurbished health centres across the province. Many doctors who fled hostilities for Damascus have returned and pharmacies are well stocked.[47] Some medical facilities may lack expensive equipment, however, or may be unable to provide specialised care.[48]

A similar trend is apparent in the education sector. In September, the government reportedly fired some school teachers who had continued to teach (and receive their government salaries) in the opposition-held south.[49] Since then, a significant num-

[42] A Syrian humanitarian in Amman reported: "In meetings between the Syrian government and officials in the south, the message was, 'you're not included in the budget for 2018'". Crisis Group interview, Amman, late October 2018. A government supporter in Daraa saw the lack of resources as evidence that "the government of President Bashar al-Assad doesn't care about Daraa and its people". Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.

[43] "Daraa: Deterioration of the medical sector after closing the field hospitals", *Al-Modon*, 26 August 2018 (Arabic).

[44] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018. In late October, humanitarian workers in Amman who had previously operated medical facilities in southern Syria reported that only 20 per cent of their former staff were still on the job.

[45] "Syrian and Russian Forces Targeting Hospitals as a Strategy of War", Amnesty International, 3 March 2016; "Syria's Assault on Doctors", *The New York Review of Books*, 3 November 2013; "Doctors on the frontline: we are targets in Syria's civil war", *The Conversation*, 20 December 2013; and "Syria White Helmets evacuation criticised by government", BBC, 23 July 2018. Medical workers quoted in these reports say regime military personnel would tell them that giving medical assistance to rebels amounted to supporting terrorism. Syrian UN ambassador Bashar Jaafari, speaking before the UN Security Council, accused the French humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières of "behaving [...] as terrorists without borders". UN Security Council Meeting, 17 April 2018.

[46] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018. In late October, humanitarian workers in Amman who had previously operated medical facilities in southern Syria reported that only 20 per cent of their former staff were still on the job.

[47] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, late December 2018.

[48] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, via messaging app, February 2019.

[49] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Amman, late October 2018. A source from a town near Daraa said the government had suspended a number of teachers there at the beginning of the school year because their names "had a question mark on them", in other words, because a security agency had blacklisted them. Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, early November 2018. On 10 November 2018, a pro-opposition website reproduced a purported government circular listing names of teachers banned from the service. "The Assad government dismisses 30 teachers in Daraa", *Baladi*, 10 October 2018 (Arabic).

ber of previously displaced teachers and administrators have returned from Damascus. Schools have reopened, which has persuaded other displaced people to return home. To spare themselves the cost of residing in Damascus, residents are contributing to local schools' rehabilitation. A resident of Nawa said:

> Families here make donations to equip local government schools. Keeping children in school in Daraa or Damascus requires renting a flat there, which costs 60,000-70,000 pounds ($150-180) in Damascus. Better to give that money to equip a school in the village and send our children there.[50]

Other locals are thriving in the new environment, on the strength of their loyalty (longstanding or recently professed) to the Damascus government and security bodies. After the regime dismissed the south west's opposition-era local councils, nationwide local elections on 16 September 2018 generated new municipal councils, including in Daraa and Quneitra provinces.[51] Locals regarded most candidates as loyalists who had maintained contact with the regime during rebel rule, and were now being rewarded.[52] Candidates appeared to be handpicked by local Baathist officials and security bodies.[53] Voter turnout in previously rebel-held areas was sparse.[54] A public employee in Daraa commented:

> The Syrian government wants to have full control of Daraa, more even than before 2011. It cannot make any reforms. It is like a windowpane: when it is broken, it cannot be fixed. There is no hope that we'll have local autonomy.[55]

On balance, the state's return appears to be a mixed blessing for the people of the south in terms of everyday life and survival.[56] It is certainly a relief that freedom of movement is restored, and that essential supplies, including medication, are now freely available. Likewise, the threats of bombing and further violence have vanished, though life was reasonably safe already before the offensive, thanks to de-escalation.[57] Many southerners are faring worse than before, however, due to the sudden severing of cross-border assistance and the Syrian government's unwillingness to grant regular, direct access to Damascus-based aid organisations. Local governance has fallen back under the purview of the security agencies, signalling another key feature of agreements on the regime's terms: the return of the security state.

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[50] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, late December 2018.
[51] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.
[52] "Syrians divided over prospects for local election results, as government 'consolidates its power'", Syria Direct, 20 September 2018.
[53] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October 2018; Western diplomats and humanitarian workers, Amman, mid-October 2018; Beirut, late November 2018.
[54] While the security agencies enforced voting in areas that were under regime control before July 2018, in particular among public employees (voting occurred on a Sunday, the first day of the Syrian work week), they made no such effort in the newly reconquered areas, leading to a low participation rate. Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, late November 2018.
[55] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.
[56] "The agreements cut access for aid organisations – who is filling the gap?" *Enab Baladi,* 16 December 2018 (Arabic).
[57] See Crisis Group, *Keeping the Calm*, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

III. The Fog of the Afterwar

For southerners who sided with the rebellion, the state's return carries the imminent threat of reprisal. Males between 18 and 42 also face the prospect of compulsory military service, at a time when a major military operation in Idlib looms. The terms of local surrender agreements provided some respite, including a six-month grace period for conscription and the opportunity for residents and former rebels to be cleared of charges of "terrorism" by "resolving their status.[58] Some of these deals also included explicit offers whereby former rebels, once cleared, could become part of the government forces, in particular the Russian-sponsored 5th Corps, to fight against ISIS, first and foremost in the south.

In practical terms, this arrangement meant that in a number of locations, rebels have retained their light weapons and part of their military structures to this day, with some of them formally joining the 5th Corps while de facto keeping a degree of autonomy under their previous rebel commanders. Some have retained local influence or have leveraged good relations with the Russians to bargain for better services and protect their men from arbitrary arrest by the security agencies, which have reasserted themselves in the area.[59] In early October, a Western diplomat in Amman said:

> Where the Russians negotiated reconciliation deals, things are different. Some of the commanders remain in charge of their militias. These commanders still have a say in the south.[60]

Yet it remains unclear how long these ex-rebels can keep their relative margin of manoeuvre. Already in September, Russia dissolved the western section of the 5th Corps when local commanders could not muster fighters for a then-impending regime offensive against rebels in Idlib.[61] This step left roughly two thousand men without a

[58] See fn 9 above.

[59] Crisis Group interview, former rebel commander, Amman, late October 2018. See also "Confrontations between regime militia and the Shabab al-Sunna faction, the latter arrests members of air force intelligence", *Nidaa Souriya*, 1 September 2018 (Arabic); and "'Like a big prison': Months into reconciliation, invisible borders still divide Syria's southwest", Syria Direct, 12 December 2018. For instance, the eastern Daraa countryside was reportedly fast-tracked for restored electricity and telecommunications, which several interviewees attributed to the prominent role that the local rebel group and its commander had assumed in the Russian-sponsored 5th Corps. Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018; Crisis Group interview, Syrian humanitarian worker, Amman, late October 2018.

[60] Crisis Group interview, Amman, early October 2018. According to Al-Jabassini, rebel leaders in eastern Daraa benefited from being the first to sign the surrender deals, and later proved themselves to be more reliable partners for the Russians than counterparts from elsewhere in the south west. For this reason, rebels as well as civilians in eastern Daraa enjoy better protection from the regime's security agencies, and former rebel leaders have more leverage to intervene and solve cases of arbitrary arrest. Arrests and assassinations of prominent former rebel commanders seem to have been largely restricted to western Daraa, where the rebels' links to the Russians were significantly weaker from the beginning. Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria", op. cit.

[61] Only the commander of the 5th Corps' eastern section, former Shabab al-Sunna leader Ahmad al-Oudeh, sent some 250 men to Idlib. "Russia dissolves the 5th Corps, and the 4th Division attracts its fighters", *Al-Modon*, 17 September 2018 (Arabic). After the regime cancelled its Idlib offensive,

salary, according to pro-opposition media.[62] Some of them subsequently enlisted in the army's elite 4th Division under Maher al-Assad, the president's brother, with offers of pay, security cards (which protect against arbitrary arrest) and renewed promises that the army would post them only in their home areas. Interviews conducted by Crisis Group in those areas in late December suggest that the security services keep a close watch on such former rebel groups as remain, setting up checkpoints around their villages. A former rebel fighter from Nawa said:

> The security agencies can arrest anybody they want to in Nawa. There are some rebel leaders who still have a few dozen fighters, but the government leaves them to become weaker by the day. The rebels are deserting their leaders and joining the army and security bodies looking for protection and to make money after they lost their salaries.[63]

In the medium term, these former rebel commanders are unlikely to retain whatever relative autonomy they still have, in particular once Russian engagement in the area end. They may continue to exist as permanent auxiliaries of the Syrian military, as has occurred with pro-regime militias throughout the course of the war.[64]

Moreover, despite the negotiated deals and subsequent clearance procedures, and the presence of the Russian guarantors, security agencies have arrested dozens of former rebels since the state returned to the south.[65] While the scope of the phenomenon is difficult to assess, by mid-October it apparently had become enough of a nuisance for the Defence Ministry to issue a circular, calling on the intelligence agencies and armed forces to refrain from arresting individuals able to show clearance papers, even if their names still appear on a "wanted" list.[66]

al-Oudeh's troops participated in the offensive against ISIS east of Sweida; since then, they have deployed in Deir al-Zour, in preparation for a possible regime operation in SDF-held territory after a U.S. withdrawal from the north east. Crisis Group interview, Shabab al-Sunna member, via messaging app, late December 2018. While none of the agreements seen by Crisis Group contains explicit guarantees for exclusive deployment in the south, rebels claim that they received verbal assurances from Russian officers. See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Post-Rebellion South: Interview I & II", Pundicity, 13 and 16 August 2018.

[62] "Russia dissolves the 5th corps", op. cit. A different source put the number at 1,700. "The factions of western Daraa strike an agreement with regime intelligence", *Qasioun*, 11 October 2018.

[63] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, late December 2018.

[64] See Kheder Khaddour, "Syria's troublesome militias", Carnegie Middle East Center, 5 November 2018.

[65] In mid-December, a Syrian opposition-affiliated group in Amman said that it had documented more than 400 arrests, more than 80 per cent of whom were civilians, ie, people who were not part of an armed group. According to this account, three died allegedly under torture while in detention, while 40 were released. Crisis Group email communication, director of ETANA, 13 December 2018. Opposition media reported at least two deaths under torture: "A martyr 'under torture' from Mlaiha Al-Gharbiya ... after Air Force Intelligence arrested him recently", Horan Free League, 19 November 2018; "Daraa: Air Force Intelligence kills the commander Al-Jamous under torture", *Al-Modon*, 11 November 2018 (Arabic). Residents reported many more cases in which the detention period was too short (several days, sometimes hours) to be registered by such monitors. Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, late December 2018. For a later report of arrests, see Etihad Press, "The regime launches arrest campaign in Daraa", translated and republished by *The Syrian Observer*, 14 February 2019.

[66] Reproduced on the pro-regime Facebook page Dimashq al-An, 16 October 2018 (Arabic).

One problem appears to be that the various security agencies operating in the area may not coordinate among themselves. In Daraa, Military Intelligence issues clearance papers and supposedly strikes cleared individuals from the "wanted" lists it uses at its checkpoints.[67] Yet Air Force Intelligence, Political Security and State Security, which run their own checkpoints and employ separate layers of screening at particularly important checkpoints, often ignore the clearance papers issued by Military Intelligence because they may not have received the updates that remove cleared individuals.[68] As a result, clearance papers do not reliably protect the bearer from arrest.[69] A former rebel reports:

> I was going into Daraa city to register my newborn daughter. The Military Intelligence checkpoint at the entrance checked my name on the computer and told me that I am wanted. I showed them my clearance paper. They asked if I knew about hidden weapons and ammunition. They kept me for a week, after which I was released with help from my father, who had gone to a Russian officer who made phone calls to get me released.[70]

Russian officers are routinely called upon in such cases and often intervene, in particular for former rebels whose former commanders still maintain a direct relationship to the Russian military. Yet they do not intervene when individuals are apprehended for alleged crimes perpetrated in the course of the conflict, creating a loophole that security agencies can use to target former rebels or opposition activists. Individual citizens who give evidence of abuse or violence committed by particular rebels against themselves or relatives have the option to initiate criminal proceedings, and there are consistent claims that security agencies encourage people to do just that.[71]

There are also an increasing number of assassinations of former rebel leaders with little clarity as to who is behind them. In some cases, the circumstances suggest that the security agencies are the culprits.[72] In others, it appears equally plausible that former rebels who have gone underground are exacting revenge upon those they see as having betrayed the cause. Rebels sold off numerous weapons through the smuggling

[67] Security forces at checkpoints receive CDs containing the names of wanted individuals, which they read on their laptop computers. Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October and late December 2018.

[68] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October.

[69] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October and late December 2018.

[70] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018. By late December, the situation had improved at Military Intelligence checkpoints, where agents mostly accept clearance papers even when individuals are still listed as "wanted". The other agencies have not upgraded their practices. Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, late December 2018.

[71] See, for instance, the televised confession, clearly given under duress, by former rebel commander Ahmad Farroukh, broadcast on the pro-regime Sama TV station: "Al-Farroukh arrested in Daraa: 'See whether "resolving status" helps you'", *Al-Modon*, 24 October 2018 (Arabic). In the television broadcast, the presenter states that the arrest occurred in response to a legal complaint by the victim of a kidnapping attributed to Farroukh. The accused says the same in the video: "Resolving status doesn't do any good for someone against whom there's an individual claim". The arrest, which occurred on 15 September, reportedly included nineteen individuals from the town of Al-Hara near the Golan, including the head of the local council during rebel rule.

[72] "'We don't even know if he's alive': Despite promises of reconciliation, rebels and former opposition figures disappear", Syria Direct, 15 November 2018.

networks, as suggested by a steep decline in prices in the regime conquest's aftermath.[73] Yet locals claim that lack of trust in the agreements led many to hide lighter weapons away.[74] Sporadic attacks on regime checkpoints suggest that a residual insurgent potential exists.[75]

Arrests also affect civilians, that is, residents of the area who did not join an armed rebel faction but have a history of opposing the regime through participation in protests or on social media. Many of those arrested at checkpoints are interrogated for a few days or even hours, and then let go. Detainees are asked about political activities throughout the war, including the uprising's largely peaceful early phase, their own as well as those of relatives and friends, suggesting that the security apparatus is working off blacklists from six or seven years ago, and seeks to forestall the re-emergence of dissent.[76] Civilians mostly lack the direct links to the Russian military that former rebels can rely on, but relatives sometimes succeed, through well-connected intermediaries, to secure Russian officers' help in facilitating releases.[77] Again, though, the Russians say they cannot help if someone has been detained on criminal charges.

Amid such pervasive uncertainty, many individuals with an activist or rebel past limit their physical movements to the inescapable minimum to avoid checkpoints, while still living in fear of being rounded up at home. More than anything, however, the overwhelming dread is that once the Russian presence ends, whatever mitigating influence it now exercises will dissipate, giving the regime free rein to unleash its wrath on the "cradle of the revolution", after collecting abundant fresh data on its residents and their political orientation. The former rebel quoted above recalls an exchange immediately before his Russian-mediated release:

> When I was released, I heard a direct threat from a young Alawite officer. He said to me: 'Do you, people of Daraa, think Russia will protect and cover you forever? The Russians will leave after one month or one year but we will arrest you all and teach you to worship Bashar al-Assad. We won't forget what you did'.[78]

[73] Prices for bullets fell from 130 to 35 Syrian pounds, for Kalashnikov assault rifles from between 150,000 and 300,000 pounds to roughly 50,000 pounds, and for DShK heavy machine guns from one to half a million pounds. During that period, the exchange rate was roughly 450 pounds to the U.S. dollar. Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.

[74] Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.

[75] "An attack by unidentified gunmen targets a security checkpoint of the regime forces in Daraa countryside", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 5 December 2018.

[76] Crisis Groups interviews, via messaging app, late November and late December 2018. A Western diplomat familiar with security practices in Syria said: "The Syrian security agencies do not forget. There was a time, roughly between 2013 and 2016, when the number of arrests in regime areas receded, because most of the security guys were needed at the front lines. When the military situation improved and they were rotated back into their offices, they started arresting people for things they had done three years earlier. They just went back to their old lists and continued where they had left off". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2017.

[77] According to residents, some individuals perform the role of intermediaries in return for material favours, a share of which they then pass on to Russian officers to whom they have access. Crisis Group interviews, via messaging app, late November and late December 2018.

[78] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, mid-October 2018.

IV. The Spectre of Iran

Some southerners, especially opposition supporters, allege that Iran and the irregular forces it backs, in particular the Lebanese Hizbollah, have surreptitiously started to expand their influence in the south since the government's return. They claim that Hizbollah and Iran are recruiting locals, building a base in the Lajat area in north-eastern Daraa, running training camps and placing fighters in the state's Iran-friendly branches, such as the army's 4th Armoured Division and Air Force Intelligence.[79] According to these accounts, Hizbollah offers better pay than the Russian-sponsored 5th Corps, protection from security agencies and a guarantee not to send recruits to other fronts in Syria.[80] Formally, these fighters are part of the 4th Division and are wearing its uniforms and insignia, yet according to locals, they receive independent funding, better food and equipment than regular units, and are under the purview of Lebanese or Iranian commanders.[81]

Iran is also reportedly engaged in outreach to residents of the south west. Indeed, in October, the representative in Syria of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, made a well-publicised visit to Daraa city, meeting with local notables and promising that Iran would contribute to the area's reconstruction.[82]

Israel has expressed concerns about Iran-backed fighters seeking to infiltrate the south in the midst of Syrian security forces. In the immediate aftermath of the regime's mid-2018 offensive, Israeli officials asserted that "a new Hizbollah front" on Israel's northern border would be unacceptable.[83] To alleviate such concerns, Russia made

[79] An aid worker originally from southern Syria said: "Hizbollah are there, but they manifest their presence by recruiting Syrians. Those linked to Hizbollah are from the same communities – not a lot of Lebanese or Iranians. Some wear Syrian uniforms, and you can't recognise non-Syrians unless they talk, and you hear them speak Lebanese Arabic. There aren't a big number of non-Syrians". Crisis Group interview, Amman, October 2018. Western media, relying on Syrian opposition sources, have echoed these accounts. "Iran ally Hezbollah pays Syrian rebels to switch sides", *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2018.

[80] These accounts were echoed in Crisis Group interviews with local residents with first-hand knowledge.

[81] Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, late December 2018. Reports compiled by an Amman-based Syrian organisation with a network of sources in southern Syria suggest that Hizbollah has been working to establish embedded paramilitary structures, training camps and control over roads in the south. Except for one location right on the armistice line, most of these activities reportedly occur in an area starting roughly 15km east of the demilitarised zone in the occupied Golan Heights. According to these sources, these forces (estimated at roughly 2,500 by early January 2019, up from 2,000 in late November 2018) are led by a small number of Lebanese Hizbollah cadres but recruited locally, and predominantly Sunni Muslim. "Hezbollah's strategy in south Syria", ETANA Syria (Amman), 10 December 2018; "Nature of Hezbollah's presence in south Syria", ETANA Syria (Amman), 15 January 2019.

[82] "Why is Khamenei interested in sponsoring the residents of Daraa", *Al-Modon*, 25 October 2018 (Arabic). Iran reportedly sponsors a charitable foundation, al-Zahra, set up in Daraa city by a prominent local family. Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, late December 2018.

[83] "As Iran and Assad move in southern Syria, US and Russia must discuss response", *The Hill*, 31 May 2018. On 1 August 2018, Israel's regional cooperation minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, told Israeli army radio: "We are not ready to see a new Hizbollah front on our northern border between Israel and Syria. This is something that is dangerous. This is something that, if we don't prevent it today,

at least implicit guarantees to Israel to exclude Iranian and Iranian-linked paramilitaries from the offensive, and to keep them away from the Israeli-occupied Golan afterward.[84] Russian officials subsequently emphasised Russia's faithful delivery on those promises.[85] Russia has taken other steps to reassure Israel and facilitate a return to the pre-war status quo in Syria's south west, including deploying military police to patrol Syrian territory adjacent to the occupied Golan and facilitate the return of the UN Disengagement Observer Force.[86] An expanding Iranian role in the south west would seem to contravene Russian assurances.

Without free access to southern Syria it is extremely difficult to validate these claims or judge the scope of the presence of Hizbollah and Iran-aligned fighters in the south, let alone whether they are building up offensive capabilities. What is more, emphasising Iranian involvement is likely the best chance for the Syrian opposition to keep President Donald Trump's administration in Washington engaged and convincing it to exert pressure on the regime.

Still, there is sufficient reporting to suggest that Hizbollah and Iran-aligned fighters are present and engaged in recruitment and training. That could potentially trigger an Israeli-Iranian military escalation. Thus far, Israeli officials do not appear overly alarmed about developments in the south west. An Israeli defence official said:

> The Iran-backed presence in south west Syria is mostly happening through a Shiisation of Syrian army units with the aim of making Israel's life difficult. Shia militia fighters, both Iraqi and Hizbollah-recruited Druze, are embedded within Syrian army forces while donning its uniform and carrying Syrian documents. We have informed Russia of this.[87]

when still at its outset, will exact a heavy price from us down the line". Quoted in "Russia says Iranian forces pulled back from Golan in Syria: Israel unsatisfied", Reuters, 1 August 2018.

[84] "Netanyahu says Putin agreed to restrain Iran in Syria", *The New York Times*, 12 July 2018. An Iranian official confirmed that Iran had complied with a mid-2018 Russian request to stay out of the south. Crisis Group interview, February 2019.

[85] Russian officials have repeatedly emphasised Moscow's commitment to Israel's security. In the aftermath of the regime's recapture of the south west, Russia's special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, told Russia's TASS news service: "The Iranians withdrew and the Shi'ite formations are not there", and that while some Iranian advisers may be deployed, "there are no units of heavy equipment and weapons that could pose a threat to Israel at a distance of 85km from the line of demarcation". Quoted in "Russia says Iranian forces", op. cit. In September 2018, the Russian defence ministry spokesman, Major General Igor Konashenkov, claimed that "with the assistance of Russian forces, all Iran-backed formations with heavy weapons were withdrawn from the Golan Heights to a safe distance for Israel – more than 140 kilometres to the east of Syria". "Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation", Facebook, 23 September 2018.

[86] "Russian military keeping the peace along demilitarized zone on Syrian-Israeli border", TASS, 20 September 2018. On the same day as the Nasib border crossing reopened in October 2018, the crossing linking the Israeli-occupied Golan and Syrian regime-held al-Quneitra province reopened to UN observers. "Syria reopens vital crossing with Jordan, UN post with Golan", Associated Press, 15 October 2018.

[87] Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 31 January 2019. In late October 2018, Israel media claimed that Hizbollah was attempting to establish itself in the Druze town of Hader near the occupied Golan, allegedly led by Mustafa Mughniya, eldest son of the late Hizbollah strategist Imad Mughniya. "Revealed: Hezbollah establishes terror infrastructure in Druze Golan", *Israel HaYom,* 25 October 2018.

But Israel remains determined to roll back what it considers a strategic Iranian presence across all of Syria.[88] It has conducted a covert military campaign against Iranian assets there.[89] Since September 2018, Tel Aviv has faced constraints on its room for manoeuvre after Syrian air defences accidentally downed a Russian aircraft, an act which Moscow blamed on "irresponsible" Israeli behaviour, prompting it to adopt a more restrictive policy toward Israeli attacks in Syria.[90] The subsequent lull has apparently come to an end.[91] Thus the possibility of direct confrontation in southwestern Syria, as may have occurred in May 2018 and again on a smaller scale in January 2019, cannot be excluded.[92] A senior Israeli official said:

[88] Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials and former security officials, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, November 2018. A former head of Israel's National Security Council referred to it as "an independent Iranian war machine". Yaacov Amidror, "The Logic of Israel's Actions to Contain Iran in Syria and Lebanon", Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies, 16 September 2018.

[89] "IDF says it has bombed over 200 Iranian targets in Syria since 2017", *Times of Israel,* 4 September 2018. In an interview published on the occasion of his retirement, Israel's chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot said: "We struck thousands of targets without claiming responsibility or asking for credit". Quoted in "The man who humbled Qassim Sulaimani", *The New York Times,* 11 January 2019.

[90] "Russia is trying to limit Israeli military activities in Syria", Fanack, 7 December 2018.

[91] On 5 February 2019, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, stated that in the case of continued Israeli attacks on Syria, "the measures foreseen for deterrence and for a crushing and proportional response will be activated". "Iran's top security official warns Israel against continued attacks on Syria", Fars, 5 February 2019. On the same day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, describing the purpose of a planned meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on 21 February, said: "It's very important that we continue to prevent Iran from entrenching in Syria. In many ways we've blocked that advance and we're committed to continue blocking it, preventing Iran from creating another war front against us, right here opposite the Golan Heights. This is the main subject I will be discussing with President Putin". Prime Minister's Office, 5 February 2019.

[92] On 9 May 2018, the Iranian Qods force launched twenty missiles from Syrian territory at the occupied Golan Heights, according to the Israel Defense Forces. See tweet by Israel Defense Forces, @IDF, 3:26pm, 9 May 2018. An Israeli military official later said the number was 32. See tweet by Israel Defense Forces, @IDF, 11:39am, 21 May 2018. A high-ranking Iranian official denied involvement: "Iranian official: 'We have nothing to do with missiles launched at Israel'", *Ynet*, 10 May 2018. With regard to this incident, a Lebanese journalist with close links to Hizbollah said: "The exchange of fire in May showed the Israelis that retaliation can happen". He added: "Hizbollah wants to keep the balance there [Syria], and to put some limits on Israeli actions". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, 20 October 2018. On 21 January 2019, in an apparent response to an Israeli attack near Damascus airport the day before, an allegedly Iranian-made missile was fired at a ski resort on Mount Hermon in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The Israeli military attributed the missile to the Iranian Qods force. "Israel's extensive strike against Iran in Syria: what we know", *Haaretz,* 21 January 2019. Israel has refrained from disclosing the exact launch site, but has stated that it was located in "a Syrian area we were promised Iran had left", in an apparent reference to Russia-provided guarantees. "IDF: Iran fired missile from an area we were promised Iran had left", *Jerusalem Post,* 21 January 2019. The *Haaretz* military correspondent, who after an Israeli attack on 25 December 2018 had indicated that the Israeli leadership might be losing faith in the Russian guarantees, commented on 21 January 2019: "It turned out that the Russian promise didn't encompass the area of the capital, Damascus, nor were they exactly keeping their word in the Golan". Amos Harel, "Iran showed signs of slowing down its Syria activity: then new weapons arrived in Damascus", *Haaretz,* 30 December 2018. See also "Israel's battle with Iran in Syria is back in high gear and far from over", *Haaretz,* 21 January 2019. On 11 February 2019, Israel shelled several locations

> So far, we have managed to target Iran's presence without provoking an uncontrolled escalation. That is quite an achievement. But Iran seems willing to absorb the blows and keep trying to expand its presence. At some point, one of us could miscalculate. And then, all bets would be off.[93]

in the vicinity of the occupied Golan. "Syrian report: Israel fired missiles in southern province", *Ynet*, 12 February 2019.

[93] Crisis Group interview, February 2019.

V. Policy Implications

After retaking the south, the regime has begun to reassemble its infrastructure of authoritarian rule. The process appears disjointed but basic outlines are emerging. The regime started by wiping out local self-governance structures that had existed during the period of rebel control. Former rebel commanders who were left in charge of armed fighters have retained some bargaining power and local influence, in particular through relations with the Russian military. Once the Russian presence ends, their limited autonomy will be further diminished. Their future status, and perhaps their survival, will therefore depend on their relationship with the security agencies.[94]

Regime retribution against former rebels and opposition activists, in particular in the form of arbitrary arrest, appears haphazard, but is frequent enough to keep a significant part of the population in a state of continuous uncertainty and fear. Many are additionally concerned that a Russian disengagement, when it occurs, will expose them to further reprisal. Local governance has been re-established under the apparent auspices of the security agencies and remains subject to their vetting. Security control appears to be the regime method of choice for consolidating its hold on the south.

External actors can glean a couple of lessons from these trends. One is that international donors, UN agencies and Jordanian authorities should refrain from organising large-scale return to the area. For the time being, the area cannot absorb a significant number of returning refugees and displaced persons, since it can barely sustain the people living there now. Health care, educational services and essential infrastructure are slowly improving, but without opportunities to work and generate an income, returnees will be unable to repair destroyed dwellings and provide for themselves. The government's restrictive access policies are preventing humanitarian assistance from more effectively plugging the holes.

Refugees may be struggling in Jordan, where most of those from the south live.[95] But the absence of jobs and aid at home – both available in Jordan – will dissuade most of them from returning. The threat of arbitrary arrest will further deter those who have a record of opposition to the regime, as will conscription into the military. Unless their situation in Jordan deteriorates dramatically, only a few refugees are likely to return voluntarily any time soon. Therefore, donors and the Jordanian state should maintain assistance for refugees in Jordan to avoid economic pressure that would push refugees into unsustainable and perhaps unsafe return.

Russia's professed desire to achieve a sustained refugee return to Syria is a potential entry point for Western donor countries. They could start a conversation with

[94] In northern Homs, where Russia had assumed a guarantor position similar to the south, it withdrew its military police immediately after the expiration of the initial six months it had committed to, apparently without prior consultation with locals, despite provisions in the agreement that allowed for a presence of up to two years. "The Russian military police withdraw from northern Homs", *Al-Modon*, 27 October 2018 (Arabic). By contrast, the agreements concluded in the south do not contain commitments to explicit deadlines, rendering the Russian engagement open-ended, but also allowing for disengagement at short notice.

[95] "Syrian Refugees in Jordan by Origin - Admin Level 4 - End of September 2018", UNHCR, 14 October 2018.

Moscow about how conditions in the south stand in the way of substantial returns; they could further press the Kremlin to lean on its Syrian ally about making the process of "resolving status" more transparent and reliable, and opening up humanitarian aid access. Damascus-based aid organisations and UN agencies like the World Food Programme need regular, direct access to the south to best serve the area's vulnerable residents and to ensure the integrity of the humanitarian response is up to a standard that allows donors to continue their support.

The experience of the south also provides further evidence that "settlements" and "reconciliation", the terms that the Syrian regime uses to refer to negotiated surrenders in the south and other areas retaken from rebels, often ring hollow for those at the receiving end.[96] The regime appears bent on reasserting its full authority and repressive apparatus, with security agencies as its essential tool. As for Russia, it has not attempted to prevent the reconstitution of regime control. Its overarching objective appears to be to facilitate the reimposition of regime control, not to resist or redirect it.

This, too, carries lessons for the future. For parts of Syria still beyond Damascus's control, it remains to be seen whether they will be reintegrated into a whole Syria through negotiations, or whether the regime will seek to retake them by force – an undertaking that would require Russia's military support and, almost inevitably, would be enormously costly and bloody. Moscow wants Damascus to regain control over all of its territory; it also aims to rehabilitate the Syrian regime politically and economically, and to this end has tried to achieve buy-in for a constitutional process and reconstruction, in particular from European countries.[97]

All of these objectives would be jeopardised in the case of violent takeovers of the remaining areas out of government control. In contrast, if Russia could broker negotiated solutions, it would advance its goals: a return of the Syrian state; establishing Russia as the one arbiter who can move the conflict in Syria toward a non-violent denouement; and better prospects for European re-engagement. But what is happening in the south is not encouraging Syrians in areas that still escape Damascus' control to accept the state's return.

Negotiations between Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria's north east have previously stalled over questions of the Syrian state's authority and the restoration of its security apparatus. Prospects for a negotiated return of the Syrian state to the north east would be improved if Russia could convince the regime to consent to a degree of local self-governance, with local security remaining in local hands to the extent possible.[98] The Syrian Democratic Forces do not currently find themselves in the same dire straits that the south west's rebels did in June 2018; they are militarily stronger and reaching some arrangement involving the U.S. and Turkey remains

[96] Fadi Adleh and Agnes Favier, "Local Reconciliation Agreements in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding", European University Institute, June 2017; and Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, "Syria's Reconciliation Agreements", 30 July 2017.

[97] For example, see President of Russia, "Joint Statement by the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the President of the Russian Federation and the President of the Republic of Turkey", 14 February 2019.

[98] For a discussion of the dilemma created by the issue of security control for a possible agreement in the north east, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°190, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East,* 5 September 2018.

at least plausible. To secure a consensual, negotiated deal in the north east, in other words, Russia would need to improve on what it delivered in Syria's south west.[99] That should not be impossible: indeed, Russia has shown that it can have at least some mitigating effect on regime behaviour, even if it has not truly stood in the way of the regime's return. The Russian military has curbed practices liable to overly antagonise the local population and has protected some former rebel leaders with whom it built relationships.

Russia can play a positive mediating role on behalf of the north east's residents and interested foreign countries. Not only in the north east, but nationwide: if Moscow wants Europeans and other donor countries to invest in Syria's reconstruction and to normalise relations with Damascus, it should press the regime to improve international humanitarian access to areas that have returned to regime control and moderate the regime's treatment of local residents.[100] For donors who do not have direct or useful communications with Damascus, Russia can be their interface with the regime and their advocate on the ground inside Syria as they demand that Syria be a country they can responsibly rebuild.[101]

Concerning the reported presence of Iranian proxies and the danger of a conflict with Israel, external actors should be prepared to step in to prevent incidents, such as those in May 2018 and January 2019, from spinning out of control. Russia should live up to its own commitments to Israel, and press Iran to refrain from behaviour that is liable to lead to a larger conflagration, even as it presses Israel to exercise restraint. Keeping the south quiet is in Moscow's own best interest: a major confrontation between Israel and Iran could destabilise the region and cause serious damage to Russia's Syrian ally. Recurrent military altercations at the current scope and pace obstruct efforts to move toward reconstruction and deter potential investors. For their part, European governments that have strong relations with Israel and maintain communication channels with Iran should urge both countries to avoid steps in the south that would destabilise the area all over again.

[99] A senior adviser to the SDF said: "The situation in Daraa may be different from the north east, but the mentality and the behavior of the regime remain the same. They will act here like they did there. And the Russians, who guaranteed these agreements, are abetting the regime's behaviour. So you cannot trust the regime, and you cannot rely only on Russian guarantees, either. For any kind of understanding, you need a certain level of trust, and that is just not there". Crisis Group interview, via messaging app, 18 February 2019.

[100] A senior Russian official privately conceded that the regime was not living up to its commitments in the south and that more needed to be done to press it on that score. Crisis Group interview, February 2019.

[101] Crisis Group is preparing a separate report on the role of Europe in Syrian reconstruction.

VI. Conclusion

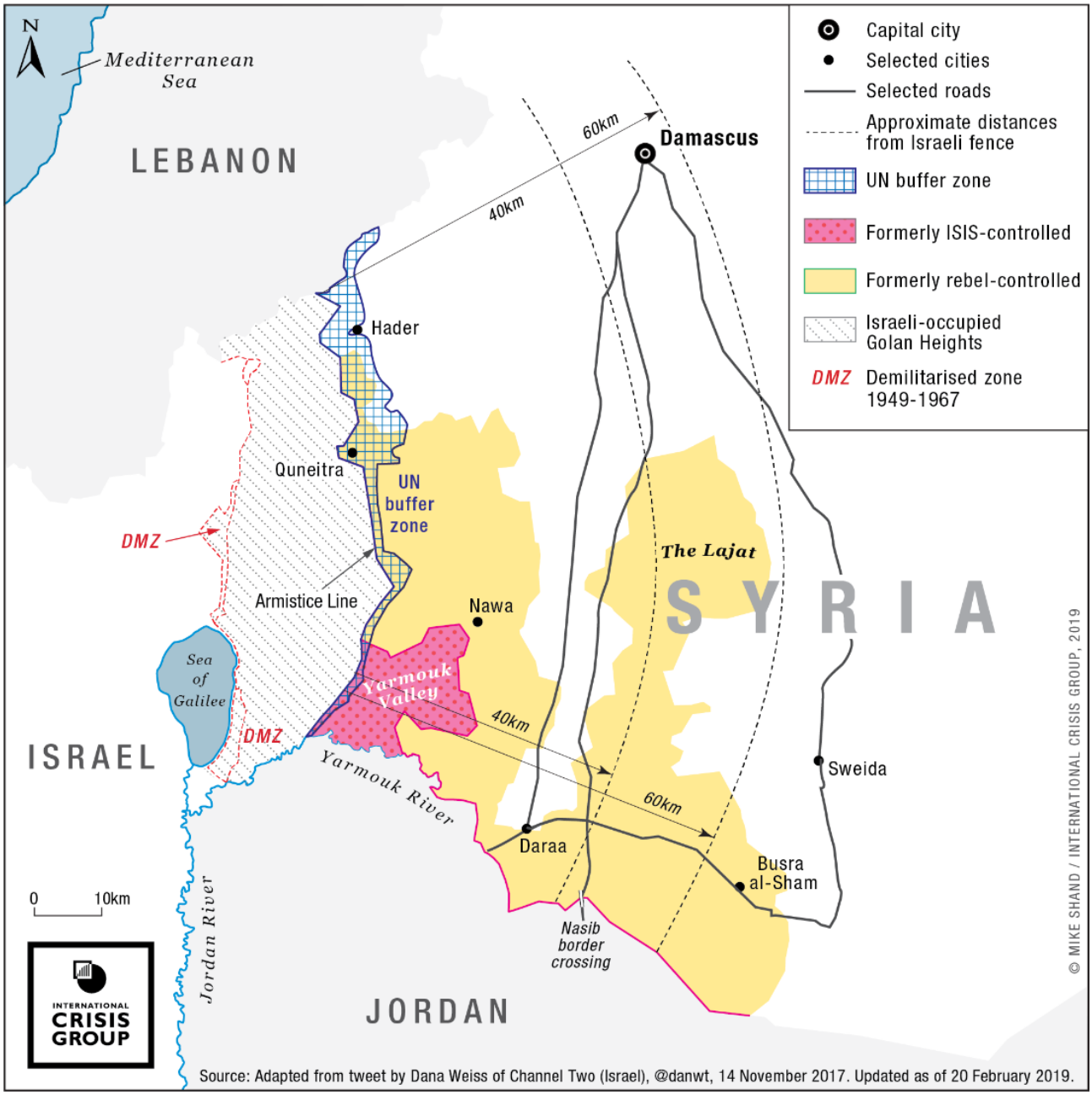
When the Syrian regime sent its army south in mid-2018 to wrest the area from rebels, who had run the area for seven years, Russian mediation limited the bloodshed. Since then, the regime has committed insufficient resources to the south's restabilisation, restricted humanitarian access and re-established authoritarian rule. As a result, security and living conditions remain precarious, militating against safe refugee returns. Meanwhile, Iran-aligned groups reportedly are trying to establish a presence close to the armistice line with Israel on the Golan Heights.

Following its success in the south, the regime is looking northward, determined to reclaim areas that remain outside its control: Idlib, now under the control of Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham; the Turkish-occupied zones of Euphrates Shield and Afrin; and the north east, which is run by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces. Negotiated solutions may limit violence. But achieving them may be contingent on how rebels view the southern precedent. Moreover, far better post-conflict conditions will be needed to enable safe refugee returns and reconstruction. So far, Russia has acted according to the letter of the agreements it mediated, but it has made scant effort to curb the regime's authoritarian practices or push for better governance.

Western donor countries should press for humanitarian access to the south and refrain from enabling refugee returns unless and until conditions improve. Russia should seek stronger security guarantees from the regime for people in previously rebel-held areas. And countries with good relations with Iran and Israel should work with both to prevent escalation.

Beirut/Brussels, 25 February 2019

Appendix A: Map of the Area of Separation



Appendix B: Text of 1 July 2018 Busra al-Sham Agreement

Statement of Agreement

Representatives of the Free Syrian Army and representatives of the Syrian government, with Russian mediation, have agreed on the following:

1. An immediate and comprehensive ceasefire.
2. Handover of heavy weapons starting from today.
3. Residents to return normally to villages and towns in which the army [i.e., Syrian Arab army] is not present; and residents to return to villag-es in which the army is present in the company of Russian military po-lice and the Red Crescent, with a guarantee from the Russian military police of those residents' safety.
4. Handover of medium weapons in the areas covered by the ceasefire to begin.
5. Resolving of the status of residents of areas covered by the ceasefire.
6. Resolving points to be distributed geographically according to need, within the agreed-upon mechanism.
7. The Syrian flag to be raised simultaneously with the entrance of civilian state institutions.
8. Fighters who resolve their status and wish to fight Daesh [ISIS] to join the [5th] Assault Corps, first and foremost in the southern region.
9. Resolving the status of defectors and those wanted for compulsory service, with a delay of six months.
10. Work on the return of all employees to their government jobs.
11. The problem of detainees and kidnapped to be solved in the Astana [working] group, and bodies of those killed to be exchanged between the two sides.
12. This agreement covers the area from Daraa to the west until the town of Smad to the east, and from Busr al-Harir in the north to the Jordanian border to the south.
13. The guarantor for this agreement is the Russian side.

Sunday, 1 July 2018

Appendix C: Text of 6 July 2018 Busra al-Sham Agreement

In Busra al-Sham on 6/7/2018, the Syrian government and armed opposition factions, with the mediation of the Russian side, arrived at the following:

1. There shall be a ceasefire, beginning from today, as the armed opposition factions begin to hand over their heavy and medium weapons in all cities and towns.
2. All militants shall have the right to resolve their status, with guarantees of Russian protection.
3. Those among the militants who do not wish to resolve their status shall be able to leave southern Syria, and to that end their exit with their families to Idlib will be organised.
4. The conditions for beginning to implement the exit of the armed factions shall be as follows:
    a. The handover of all observation points along the Syrian-Jordanian border, such that they are under the control of the Syrian government.
    b. The handover of all armed opposition factions' positions along the front with Daesh [ISIS] to Syrian Arab Army units.
5. All residents who left their cities and towns shall be able to return to them with guarantees of Russian protection.
6. The Syrian flag shall be raised, and state institutions shall return to carry out their work in these cities and towns, following the exit of those who do not wish to regularise their status.

The problem of defectors and those absent from serving the flag and reserve duty shall be resolved, and they shall be given a grace period of six months.

Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Appendix E: Reports and Briefings on TK since 2016

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Israel/Palestine

How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Russia's Choice in Syria, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000", Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar, Middle East Report N°183, 20 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad, Middle East Report N°186, 22 May 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria, Middle East Report N°187, 21 June 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire, Middle East Briefing N°61, 31 July 2018.

Saving Idlib from Destruction, Middle East Briefing N°63, 3 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°190, 5 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries, Middle East Report N°194, 14 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°66, 21 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

North Africa

Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, 22 June 2016 (also available in French and Arabic).

The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset, Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, 4 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether, Middle East and North Africa Report N°171, 21 November 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic and French).

How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

Libya's Unhealthy Focus on Personalities, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°57, 8 May 2018.

Making the Best of France's Libya Summit, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°58, 28 May 2018 (also available in French).

Restoring Public Confidence in Tunisia's Political System, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°62, 2 August 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

After the Showdown in Libya's Oil Crescent, Middle East and North Africa Report N°189, 9 August 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Breaking Algeria's Economic Paralysis, Middle East and North Africa Report N°192, 19 November 2018 (also available in Arabic and French).

Iran/Yemen/Gulf

Yemen: Is Peace Possible?, Middle East Report N°167, 9 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals, Middle East Briefing N°51, 13 December 2016 (also available in Farsi).

Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°173, 16 January 2017 (also available in Farsi).

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Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal,
Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).

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The Illogic of the U.S. Sanctions Snapback on Iran, Middle East Briefing N°64, 2 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, Middle East Briefing N°65, 6 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine, Middle East Report N°193, 21 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

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