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Syria

Exercise of authority in recaptured areas

Country of Origin Information Report





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Cover photo: © Amer Almohibany/AFP/Getty Images, A Syrian child stands in a school that was partially damaged in a reported air strike on March 7, 2017, in the rebel-held town of Utaya, in the eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus, [url](#)

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It must be noted that the review carried out by the mentioned departments, experts or organisations contributes to the overall quality of the report but does not necessarily imply their formal endorsement of the final report, which is the full responsibility of EASO.

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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)¹. The report is based on carefully selected sources of information. All sources used are referenced.

The information contained in this report has been researched, evaluated and analysed with utmost care. However, this document does not claim to be exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist.

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Neither EASO nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained in this report.

¹ The EASO methodology is largely based on the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI), 2008, and can be downloaded from the EASO website: <http://www.easo.europa.eu>.

Glossary and Abbreviations

GoS	Government of Syria
HTS	<i>Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham</i>
IS	The Islamic State (IS); also known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh.
NDF	National Defence Forces
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SARC	Syrian Arab Crescent
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Introduction

This report was drafted by Country of Origin Information (COI) specialists from the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, as listed under the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

This report concerns the Syrian territories, which have been outside the control of the Government of Syria (GoS) and returned to GoS control through so-called reconciliation agreements. It explores how these agreements were reached, their consequences for the population of the respective areas, as well as how GoS exerts its control in the aftermath. Not all areas/cities are included, but rather a selection that serves to illustrate the different developments.

Methodology

This report is produced in line with the EASO COI Report Methodology (2019)² and the EASO COI Writing and Referencing Style Guide (2019).³

The report covers the period from 2014 until October 2019. The drafting of this report was finalised on 1 October 2019. Some additional information was added during the finalisation of this report in response to feedback received during the quality control process until 28 October 2019.

Terms of Reference for this report can be found in the [annex](#) of this report.

Sources

The sources used in this report include local and regional media coverage of the signing of the so-called reconciliation agreements, as well as analyses of and comments on these agreements by academics with in-depth knowledge of Syria.

The report also draws heavily on conversations and interviews conducted by Landinfo with international organisations and local actors on its fact-finding missions in the spring of 2018 and in April 2019. These sources are further described in the [Bibliography](#) section.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, media coverage in both Syrian and international media must be carefully weighed against each other; a major research challenge. The topics addressed in this report are highly politicised, and many media are openly or secretly affiliated to one of the sides in the conflict. This means that there will often be conflicting information about a given incident, and Landinfo has, as far as possible, attempted to provide as multi-faceted a description of the situation as possible. It was difficult or impossible for Landinfo to verify some of the information conveyed by the media. However, Landinfo has tried to verify the information to the best of its ability.

Quality control

In order to ensure that the report respects the EASO COI Report Methodology, a review was carried out by COI specialists from the countries and organisations listed as reviewers in the [Acknowledgements](#) section.

² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, June 2019, [url](#)

³ EASO, Writing and Referencing Guide for EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports, June 2019, [url](#)

Structure and use of the report

This report starts with a brief introduction to the areas covered and then describes the so-called reconciliation-agreements, which constitute the formal framework for reintegrating these formerly opposition-held areas into the state. It describes the different variants of the agreements, and their main implications for the population.

It then examines in some detail how these agreements have worked out in a number of towns and districts, highlighting both similarities and differences in their implementation and the reasons for these. The last chapter provides a couple of examples of recaptured areas where no reconciliation-agreement governs their reintegration into the state.

The situation in Syria remains unstable, even in parts of the country where the state has been in control throughout the conflict and in areas formerly held by the opposition. This should be borne in mind while reading the report, as this provides an important insight into the strategy of the Syrian state for dealing with these areas, and the impacts on the population.

Map



Map 1: Syria, ©United Nations⁴

⁴ Syria, Map No. 4204 Rev. 3, April 2012, United Nations, [url](#)

1. Background

The uprising in Syria started in spring 2011 and developed into a civil war in a relatively short space of time. Areas of the country were captured by different armed groups in opposition to the Government of Syria (hereinafter GoS), and many of these areas were outside the control of the GoS for several years. At the same time, the Islamic State (IS) took control of large parts of the country, from the Turkish border at Jarablus, to Mari, as well as both sides of Lake Asad, al-Tabqa and Raqqa, and the areas on both sides of the Euphrates river down to the Iraqi border at al-Qaim. GoS managed throughout this period to keep control over a small pocket of land on the western side of the river at Deir Ez Zor, including parts of the city itself.⁵

The aforementioned previously IS-held areas were eventually captured from IS by US-backed Kurdish forces, and as of October 2019, still remained outside GoS control, except for the areas south of the Euphrates River, which is mostly desert. As of October 2019, Idlib governorate, as well as parts of Hama, Latakia and Aleppo governorates were still outside GoS' control.⁶

Other areas of the country that were previously outside GoS control, such as Daraa in the south, and areas in Rural Damascus, are now back under government control.⁷ This report describes how the GoS regained control of these areas through so-called reconciliation agreements, and how this has affected the local population.

⁵ Liveuamap, Syria, 18 October 2015, [url](#)

⁶ Liveuamap, Syria, 1 October 2019, [url](#)

⁷ Liveuamap, Syria, 1 October 2019, [url](#)

2. Reconciliation agreements

GoS has entered into reconciliation agreements (Arabic: *ittifaqat musalaha*) with different actors in most of the areas the government forces have recaptured from various anti-government groups in the last few years.

During the first years of the war, the government pursued a strategy of negotiating local ceasefire agreements; subsequently it did so with the encouragement of UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. He and others believed that this would reduce acts of violence⁸, in a war where neither party seemed to be winning.⁹

The agreements were often brokered with Russian or Iranian help, but they were also negotiated directly by GoS in some places. In many cases, local people in influential positions negotiated the deals on behalf of the rebel groups.¹⁰

GoS established a dedicated ministry for reconciliation as early as 2012, and Ali Haidar was appointed Minister of State for National Reconciliation Affairs.¹¹ Reconciliation agreements became a main component of the strategy to recapture areas when Russia became increasingly involved in the war in 2015.¹² In February 2016, Russia established the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, operated from Hmeimim military air base outside Jableh, on the Mediterranean Coast.¹³ The name was later changed to the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring.¹⁴

The agreements have a number of characteristics in common, although they vary from outright capitulation agreements to more genuine reconciliation agreements. The balance of power on the ground largely determined the content of the agreements.¹⁵ In strategically important areas for the GoS, and areas where it has been under pressure, GoS has been more willing to make concessions than in areas where the opposition has been more divided and incapable of acting concertedly.¹⁶ Another factor that has reportedly influenced the negotiations on the many different agreements has been pressure from a population tired of war; a population that has had to live under prolonged sieges and bombardment in many cases.¹⁷

2.1 Criticism of the reconciliation agreements

The Syrian opposition has long criticised these agreements, claiming that they are not about reconciliation, but are outright capitulation agreements. Nor does GoS attempt to conceal the fact

⁸ Sosnowski, M., Besiege, bombard, retake: Reconciliation agreements in Syria, Middle East Eye, 28 March 2018, [url](#)

⁹ Reuters, Syrian opposition must accept it has not won the war, 6 September 2017, [url](#)

¹⁰ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 6

¹² Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹³ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁴ See Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, Bulletins of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in Syrian Arab Republic, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁵ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria's reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁶ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria's reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-10

¹⁷ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria's reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 2

that its motivation for entering into such agreements is to regain control of areas held by the armed opposition.¹⁸

One of the opposition's main objections has been that GoS fails to fulfil its obligations under the agreements, and that it uses them to exact revenge on members of the opposition who sign such agreements. In other areas, it may be a case of GoS not honouring its promise to restore infrastructure, or of militias being given free rein.¹⁹

[Chapter 3](#) provides more discussion on criticism of the agreements, along with a description of the different areas and reconciliation processes.

2.2 Sieges

A common characteristic of all the areas with reconciliation agreements in place is that during the period before signing the agreements, they were under siege, in many cases, for several years.²⁰ The circumstances surrounding such sieges varied from one area to the next, and with time. In many cases, it was at times possible for the population to cross over from a rebel-held area under siege to areas under GoS control. This was possible for individuals who had no outstanding issues with the government, primarily women and children, but also students.²¹

An economy based on smuggling goods emerged in many of the former rebel-held areas, a highly profitable business for all parties in the conflict.²²

2.3 De-escalation zones

As of spring 2017, four major areas in Syria were not under GoS control, in addition to the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and IS:

- Idlib province (including parts of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia provinces)
- Large parts of Daraa province and some of Quneitra
- Ghouta east of Damascus
- Northern parts of Homs province²³

The context here was that GoS, with the aid of Russia and Iran, had retaken the last rebel-held pockets of Aleppo in 2016, which was seen as a serious setback for the opposition.²⁴

At that time, several rounds of negotiations had been attempted to try to bring an end to the war, without lasting results being achieved. After Russian forces became heavily involved on the GoS side in 2015, they slowly and gradually succeeded in stopping advances by the rebel groups. The loss of Aleppo led to a much stronger willingness to reach a negotiated solution to the war, particularly on the part of Turkey, the rebels' foremost supporter²⁵, which had realigned with Russia.²⁶

¹⁸ Ezzi, M., How the Syrian regime is using the mask of 'reconciliation' to destroy opposition institutions, Chatham House, June 2017, [url](#)

¹⁹ Hall, N., The aftershocks of reconciliation in Syria: Reflections on the past year, Atlantic Council, 17 April 2019, [url](#); Reuters, Syrian city's rebel district still in ruins years after Assad victory, 18 August 2017, [url](#)

²⁰ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 6

²¹ Landinfo interviews with an International organisation (a) in Damascus, March 2018 and April 2019

²² Asfar, R., The lucrative business of smuggling supplies into Syria's besieged Eastern Ghouta, PRI, 27 April 2017, [url](#)

²³ Based on reading of the map in ISW, Syria Situation Report: May 10 – 18, 2017, 19 May 2017, [url](#)

²⁴ Naharnet, Aleppo recapture deals setback to Gulf rebel backers, 23 December 2016, [url](#)

²⁵ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

²⁶ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria's reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 2

The foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to meet for initial peace talks in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, in December 2016, and, in January 2017, representatives of 12 anti-government factions participated in negotiations for the first time. Their delegation was led by Muhammad Alloush, the leader of Jaysh al-Islam, an organisation that controlled large parts of Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus.²⁷

The Astana process resulted in an agreement that was signed by representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey in May 2017. It stipulated the establishment of four ‘de-escalation zones’ in areas not controlled by GoS, listed above.²⁸ Many rebel representatives walked out of the agreement, and USA was also not involved in the negotiations beforehand. Initially, the agreement was supposed to lead to a complete ceasefire and ensure access to emergency relief and other humanitarian aid in these areas. It also envisaged agreement at a later stage on how the ceasefire would be monitored and complied with in practice.²⁹

An important point in both this and earlier agreements was that some ‘terrorist organisations’ would not be covered by the agreement. In practice, this meant that Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (formerly known as the al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda), and Islamic State (IS) were not parties to the agreement, and that they continued to be legitimate targets for Syrian, Russian and Iranian forces.³⁰ Both HTS and IS groups are designated as sanctioned organisations by the UN Security Council for involvement in terrorism.³¹

Agreement was eventually reached on the delimitation of the zones, and in Idlib, Russian, Iranian and Turkish forces established checkpoints to ensure that the agreement was respected.³² In autumn 2017 and early 2018, GoS and Russian forces intensified both the siege and bombing of Eastern Ghouta, and in spring 2018, the area was captured by GoS.³³ Later that same year, the rest of Daraa province also came under GoS control.³⁴ As of summer 2019, Idlib is the only one of the four de-escalation zones that still remains.³⁵ The area faces a highly uncertain future³⁶, especially because HTS largely controlled the entire province as of October 2019 reporting.³⁷ The group took control of the area in January 2019, after other rebel groups more or less collapsed,³⁸ and withdrew to the Afrin area, which is controlled by Turkey³⁹ and rebel groups that it supports.⁴⁰

²⁷ Guardian (The), Russia in power-broking role as peace talks begin in Astana, 23 January 2017, [url](#); Reuters, Syria attack triggered Western action, but on the ground Assad gained, 16 April 2018, [url](#)

²⁸ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), pp. 2-3

²⁹ WSJ, Russia, Turkey and Iran Sign Syria ‘De-Escalation Zone’ Deal, 4 May 2017, [url](#); AP News, Russia, Iran, Turkey sign on ‘de-escalation zones’ in Syria, 4 May 2017, [url](#)

³⁰ Hanna, A., Russia muscles in on de-escalation zones, Chatham House, October 2017, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Syria’s de-escalation zones: ‘We don’t trust Russia’, 9 May 2017, [url](#)

³¹ UN Security Council, United Nations Security Council Consolidated List [Generated 8 January 2020], n.d., [url](#)

³² Karasapan, O. M., The Idlib agreement and other pieces of the Syrian puzzle, Brookings Institution, 17 September 2018, [url](#); RI, Losing Their Last Refuge; Inside Idlib’s humanitarian nightmare, September 2019, [url](#), p. 8

³³ Telegraph (The), Syrian flag flying over onetime rebel stronghold Douma as Russians announce victory in Eastern Ghouta, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

³⁴ Maayeh, S., and Hares, N., The fall of Daraa, Foreign Affairs, 23 July 2018, [url](#)

³⁵ Karasapan, O. M., The Idlib agreement and other pieces of the Syrian puzzle, Brookings Institution, 17 September 2018, [url](#)

³⁶ Middle East Institute, Idlib’s Uncertain Future, n.d., [url](#); Portal (The), Uncertain future for Idlib as Turkey-Russia talks drag on, 21 May 2019, [url](#); New Turkey (The), Idlib’s Crumbling Ceasefire is a Frightening Prospect for Civilians, 7 August 2019, [url](#)

³⁷ Washington Post (The), Islamic State leader Baghdadi hid among rivals and enemies in rebel-held Syrian province, 28 October 2019, [url](#)

³⁸ Walker, P. J., Consequences of the HTS take-over in northwest Syria, Atlantic Council, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

³⁹ Al-Hilu, Khayrallah, Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Social and Economic Transformations, European University Institute, 25 July 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁰ BBC, Syria war: Why does the battle for Idlib matter?, 4 June 2019, [url](#)

2.4 Different reconciliation agreements

Below is an overview, with examples, of what the reconciliation agreements looked like; however, the list is in no way exhaustive. The content of the agreements was largely determined by the balance of power on the ground in areas where such agreements have been signed. In a 2017 report, prominent Syria researchers Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady outlined four different types of agreements:

- The most unbalanced form described consisted of agreements whereby the population of a given area was evacuated and the demographic balance changed. We find an example of such an agreement in Zabadani, a city located close to the Lebanese border in Rural Damascus governorate.⁴¹ The area is of high strategic importance, not just to GoS, but also to the Lebanese Hezbollah, which has made active contributions to the war on the GoS side.⁴² In this case, the agreement included the evacuation of Fuah and Kafriya, two besieged pro-government Shia villages in Idlib province, in other words a form of population exchange.⁴³ The inhabitants of Zabadani were evacuated to the neighbouring city of Madaya, which at the time was also outside GoS control⁴⁴, or to rebel-held areas in Idlib province. The inhabitants of Fuah and Kafriya were evacuated to Aleppo, which is controlled by GoS.⁴⁵ The agreement was brokered by Ahrar al-Sham and HTS, on the one hand, and GoS, Hezbollah and Iran, on the other.⁴⁶
- A ‘somewhat less punitive’ agreement described is one where parts of the population were allowed to stay in the area, while militant groups and others who did not accept GoS conditions were evacuated⁴⁷, usually to Idlib province.⁴⁸ Some were undoubtedly evacuated against their will, for example members of the White Helmets organisation, which GoS accuses of being terrorists.⁴⁹ Local religious Islamist leaders, who previously worked with the opposition as part of the Sharia legal system, were in some cases co-opted by GoS. Some of them have later took part in negotiations on similar agreements elsewhere.⁵⁰
- A ‘more balanced’ type of agreement described is one where the rebels remain in control of an area, but surrendered heavier weapons. They also pledged not to attack GoS forces. In return, GoS committed to lifting the blockade, returning displaced people and restoring services for the population. Hinnebusch and Imady mentioned Barzeh in Damascus as an example of a place where this type of agreement was signed in June 2014. An important factor in relation to agreements where GoS was willing to make significant concessions to the rebels is that the rebels have enjoyed a relatively strong position, and that the areas they hold are strategically important.⁵¹
- The fourth variant described is a type of agreement that can hardly be called a reconciliation agreement⁵², but that is more a ceasefire agreement. In these cases, the opposition controlled an area with one or more natural resources on which GoS is completely dependent. An

⁴¹ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 7

⁴² Alami, M., Hezbollah’s military involvement in Syria and its wider regional role, March 2017, [url](#), p. 18

⁴³ Arfeh, H., The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria, Atlantic Council, 4 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Al, ‘We Leave or We Die’: Forced Displacement under Syria’s ‘Reconciliation’ Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 61

⁴⁵ Reuters, Evacuations from besieged Syrian towns end after two-day halt, 21 April 2017, [url](#)

⁴⁶ Arfeh, H., The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria, Atlantic Council, 4 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁷ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 8

⁴⁸ Time, Idlib could be the last major battlefield of the Syrian civil war. But Assad won’t take it easily, 16 August 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Al Aswad, H., Daraa’s White Helmets: Far from safe and fleeing for Northern Syria, Middle East Eye, 1 August 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁰ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 8

⁵¹ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 8

⁵² NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

example given is Wadi Barada outside Damascus, where rebels controlled the water spring supplying the whole of Damascus. Here, an agreement was signed that stipulated that GoS would not intervene in the city or the area at all, in return for the rebels ensuring that the water supply would function as normal. After the rebels had repeatedly cut off the water supply to pressure GoS into meeting their demands, including the release of prisoners, GoS invaded the area. The same has happened in other places, such as Aleppo, where rebels controlled an important power plant.⁵³

2.5 ‘Sorting out of affairs’ (*taswiyat al-wada*)

‘Sorting out of affairs’ or legalising one’s status (Arabic: *taswiyat al-wada*) are the terms GoS uses to describe the process of reconciling with the government as an individual, as a result of the different reconciliation agreements⁵⁴, or through individual agreements, for persons who wish to return to Syria after having left illegally, such as via an unofficial border crossing.⁵⁵ For GoS, these agreements were about regaining control of the parts of the country that have been outside government control.⁵⁶

For the part of the population that chose to stay in an area covered by an agreement, this ‘sorting out of affairs’ primarily concerns two things:

- If they have been part of an armed group that has fought GoS, authorities must clarify whether they will be allowed to stay, and, if so, on what terms.⁵⁷
- Men of conscription age must serve in the military, and those called up for service in the reserve force must complete it.⁵⁸

2.5.1 The process of sorting out affairs for individuals

Though this process can vary in practice, under all circumstances⁵⁹, representatives of a security service were reported to be present to receive applications to sort out/clarify individuals’ outstanding issues with GoS.⁶⁰

A source from August 2018 indicated that prior to this, a committee comprising GoS representatives and local intermediaries registers the names of activists and rebels who wish to remain in the area in question.⁶¹ Who was assigned the role of being the local intermediaries varied. Sometimes, representatives of local rebel groups were part of the negotiation committee, but also well-known figures such as local doctors or members of the local council usually took part. The local GoS participants were often individuals with formal influence and status, for example, mayors, governors

⁵³ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), pp. 10-11

⁵⁴ SANA, Taswiyat awda’ 510 ashkhas min madinat al-Sanamayn baynahum 150 musallahan sallamu anfusahum wa-aslihatahum lil-jihat al-mukhtassa [510 persons from the city al-Sanamayn assessed their situation, including 150 armed persons who surrendered and handed in weapons to relevant agencies], 25 December 2016, [url](#); Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁵ Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, Al-qism al-qusuli, khidamat ukhra: khamisan: taswiat al-wada’a bi-sabab al-mughadara ghayr al-shari’ya (The Consular section, other services: Fifth: Sorting out/legalizing the status for having left the country illegally), n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁶ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., “Local reconciliation agreements” in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 1

⁵⁷ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁸ Ezzi, M., How the Syrian regime is using the mask of ‘reconciliation’ to destroy opposition institutions, Chatham House, June 2017, [url](#)

⁵⁹ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

⁶⁰ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁶¹ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

and other government officials. Clan and tribal leaders participated in areas of the country where they were influential.⁶²

Haid also reported in 2018 that simultaneously with names being registered, local pro-GoS intermediaries and the part of the security service responsible for the area started opening offices to consider applications from individuals who wished to surrender.⁶³

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 GoS expansive definition of ‘terrorism’. Additionally, it involves a pledge to abstain from these actions in the future. Thereafter, the individual receives a clearance paper and the security agencies supposedly removed him/her from their lists of wanted persons.⁶⁴

2.5.1.1 Who needs to apply?

There were contradictory reports on who needs to undergo the ‘sorting out of affairs’ clarification process, according to a prominent researcher at Chatham House, Syrian national Haid Haid. He mentioned in his 2018 article that some sources claimed that everyone between the ages of 18 and 55, both women and men, must complete the required forms, while other sources claimed that only ‘those who were affiliated with anti-regime groups or their international supporters, such as civil society, armed groups, media or the political opposition’ needed to do so.⁶⁵

Landinfo assesses that this reflects genuine differences in the requirements that apply from one area to the next, dictated by factors such as the degree of Russian involvement in the process and the level of anti-government activities in the area.⁶⁶

2.5.1.2 Document requirements

Landinfo does not know whether a standardised set of forms is used, or whether the forms that need to be completed vary from one area to the next. However, Landinfo assessed that the information the applicants need to provide is more or less the same in the various areas.⁶⁷

A source describing procedures in Deir Ez Zor mentioned that everyone must bring a copy of their national ID card (both sides), as well as two passport photos, which must be submitted together with the reconciliation application forms⁶⁸, while another source describing the procedures in Dara’a wrote that one should bring a personal photo and an ID card.⁶⁹

Haid wrote in August 2018 that based on his information, the first application form contains questions about the applicant’s personal data, contact details, career history, political orientation, criminal record, if applicable, and travels abroad. The form also reportedly includes questions about relatives who are active opponents of the GoS.⁷⁰

According to Haid, the second form includes twelve questions ‘directly related to the applicant’s role in any anti-regime activities, including demonstrations, armed rebellion and terrorist activities’. The

⁶² Adleh, F. and Favier, A., “Local reconciliation agreements” in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), pp. 7-8

⁶³ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁶⁵ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁶⁶ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

⁶⁷ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

⁶⁸ Hassan, M., How Russia and the regime manipulate the reconciliation process in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, Chatham House, February 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian state’s Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁷⁰ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

applicant 'is also asked about rebel groups in their areas, including the names of the leaders, their locations and activities, and the location of weapons' and weapon depots.

According to Haid, the last section of the document enquires about secret tunnels, the names and locations of people kidnapped by rebel groups, the names, affiliations and roles of foreign members of rebel groups, their location and/or foreign governments supporting them.⁷¹

Finally, Haid reported that the applicant is asked to sign a statement 'pledging not to carry out any actions against the state and its armed, security and auxiliary forces [pro-government militias] through the use of demonstrations, social media, anti-regime publications and media platforms, or armed rebellion'.⁷²

2.5.1.3 Processing of applications

These papers are then sent to the branch of the security service responsible for the area, where the information is reportedly cross-checked against the information already available about the applicant. The information is 'usually' verified through local informants affiliated to the service. Haid noted that cross-checking of the information with the other intelligence branches 'rarely' occurs, given the rivalry between them.⁷³ Landinfo does not know whether this verification process is carried out in all cases.

One source reported that once the verification process is completed, the applicant is provided with a document to prove that he has successfully undergone the clarification process. This document is usually required to pass through the country's numerous checkpoints.⁷⁴ One source mentions that applicants are first issued a temporary document that is only valid for a short period. They are also warned against leaving the area. After 7-10 days, a new document is issued, stating that the individual is no longer on the authorities' wanted list.⁷⁵ Landinfo could not verify if this document is valid at all checkpoints run by the different parts of the Syrian security apparatus.

2.5.2 Non-individual agreements

There is an example reported of a reconciliation agreement in the town of al-Sanamayn in Deraa where the parties agreed that the population must clarify their relationship with the government, but in the form of collective agreements (see section [3.2.1](#)). This was applied to clans and large families, where representatives of these groups negotiated on behalf of the groups, without the individuals themselves being involved.⁷⁶

2.5.3 Groups and individuals that are denied or do not enter into agreements

Not everyone can be party to a reconciliation agreement. This applies to individuals that have 'Syrian blood on their hands' as well as to those that are considered by GoS to be affiliated with terrorist groups like IS or HTS. Another condition of the reconciliation process is that it 'shall not overturn criminal sentences that are unrelated to current events in Syria, or which are related to the rights of other Syrian civilians'.⁷⁷ While the source above referred to the reconciliation-process in Deir Ez Zor, Landinfo assesses that the same conditions are used in connection to similar processes in other places in Syria.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Haid, H., The details of 'reconciliation deals' expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁷² Haid, H., The details of 'reconciliation deals' expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁷³ Haid, H., The details of 'reconciliation deals' expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁴ Haid, H., The details of 'reconciliation deals' expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁵ Hassan, M., How Russia and the regime manipulate the reconciliation process in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, Chatham House, February 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁶ Al Tamimi, A. J., Reconciliations: The case of al-Sanamayn in North-Deraa, 27 April 2017, [url](#)

⁷⁷ Hassan, M., How Russia and the regime manipulate the reconciliation process in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, Chatham House, February 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁸ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

Those who refuse the reconciliation agreement with GoS, as was the case for around 10 000 persons from Daraa and Quneitra governorates, were evacuated to areas under the armed opposition's control in Idlib and northern Aleppo governorates. According to OHCHR 'the evacuees included fighters and their families, as well as some who identified as journalists and humanitarian workers who claimed to fear being targeted and/or detained by GoS should they decide to remain in Dar'a'.⁷⁹

2.5.3.1 IS (Islamic State)

Sources reported that persons suspected of IS affiliation are not offered such reconciliation agreements, although GoS has on several occasions struck deals with the group and participated in the evacuation of its members.⁸⁰ In May 2018, IS soldiers and their families were evacuated from Yarmouk Camp and Hajar al-Aswad in Damascus to areas that were then under IS control in the desert in Badiya, the huge area bordering on Jordan and Iraq.⁸¹

2.5.3.2 HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

According to a 2016 source, members of HTS, formerly known as the al-Nusra Front and the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, are also not included in reconciliation agreements.⁸² Members of this group and their families have been evacuated from different parts of the country to Idlib province, large parts of which have been under HTS control since 2018.⁸³

2.5.3.3 The White Helmets

The Syrian government considers this group, also known as Syria Civil Defence, to be a terrorist organisation.⁸⁴ The group itself denies this, emphasising that it is impartial, but it only works in rebel-held parts of the country. Members of the group have usually been evacuated to Idlib⁸⁵, but in July 2018, a few hundred people, including family members, were evacuated from the Golan Heights to Jordan by the Israeli military.⁸⁶

2.5.3.4 Media activists and opposition journalists

This is a diverse group that includes many different profiles, from genuinely independent activists to journalists affiliated to various opposition media; and Landinfo assesses that it is usually not the government that explicitly denies persons in this group permission to stay, but rather the individuals themselves who 'choose' to leave.⁸⁷ They fear that information they have written or communicated in other ways will be used against them by the authorities⁸⁸ although a 2014 source reported that journalists in Syria used pseudonyms to avoid targeting by Islamic State and the GoS.⁸⁹

2.5.3.5 Others

Sources reported cases of persons who have applied for reconciliation where GoS has denied these requests. Some 200 persons from Babila, Yalda and Bayt Sahm were denied reconciliation for 'providing false information', but the security services did not provide any indication as to which

⁷⁹ OHCHR, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁸⁰ Sabbour, O., How the Assad regime has exploited "evacuation deals" to redirect Isis against the rebels, 2019, [url](#); Al Masdar News, Breaking: ISIS agrees to surrender all its territory in rural Hama to the Syrian Army, 21 September 2017, [url](#)

⁸¹ Asharq Al Awsat, ISIS militants evacuated from Southern Damascus to desert, 21 May 2018, [url](#)

⁸² Araabi, S. and Hilal, L., Reconciliation, Reward and Revenge Analyzing Syrian De-escalation Dynamics through Local Ceasefire Negotiations, Berghof Foundation, 2016, [url](#), p. 31

⁸³ Radio Free Europe, Dozens killed in blast in Syria's Idlib, 12 August 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁴ France 24, Syrian government lambasts evacuation of White Helmets as 'criminal', 23 July 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁵ AP, Syrian White Helmets evacuated to Jordan through Israel, 22 July 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁶ BBC, Syria conflict: White helmets evacuated by Israel, 22 July 2018, [url](#)

⁸⁷ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

⁸⁸ Syria Direct, At least 270 journalists and media workers stranded in southwestern Syria as murky reconciliation deal unfolds, 10 July 2018, [url](#); OHCHR, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁸⁹ Sabbagh, R., Syria: Inside the world's deadliest place for journalists, 3 December 2014, [url](#)

information was considered false, nor how this conclusion was reached. They were asked to resubmit the forms at the local security-branch in charge of the area, which likely implied being detained.⁹⁰ It has not been possible to obtain information about the fate of these persons.

The opposition outlet Enab Baladi likewise reported in September 2018 that around 400 persons from the Homs area were denied reconciliation. Several reasons for this were given by the National Security, among them that some of the persons in question would have joined Jabhat al-Nusra, later HTS, the Muslim Brotherhood, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham. Others were accused of participating in videos shot during the fight against GoS-forces. It was not known which reprisals these persons would face.⁹¹

2.6 Corruption

It has been claimed that persons unqualified to sign reconciliation agreements, including persons who have held leading positions in IS, have nonetheless been allowed to undergo the process in exchange for sums of up to 20 million Syrian pounds (just under 100 000 USD). This money reportedly went to both Russian intermediaries, who facilitated many of the agreements, and leaders of intelligence branches in the districts concerned, in this case Deir Ez Zor.⁹²

The same report stated that another incentive for allowing such persons to undergo the reconciliation process and ignoring this corruption is that GoS would like to have them on its side to use as intermediaries in connection with future negotiations. Hassan mentioned an example in his February 2019 report involving four tribal figures in Deir Ez Zor province who had previously represented a 'tribal office' affiliated with IS. They were allowed to undergo reconciliation and were then permitted to work as intermediaries between the GoS and those wanting to undergo reconciliation.⁹³

One 2016 source reported that persons who stayed behind in formerly rebel-held parts of the country have subsequently been smuggled out of these areas to the wider Idlib area with the help of corrupt security service officers.⁹⁴

2.7 Military service

Military service is mandatory for all men between the ages of 18 and 42⁹⁵, and draft evasion is a criminal offence. Through the years of conflict, the government has granted amnesty for draft evaders on a number of occasions. This means that they will not be punished but have to report to their enlistment office to start their military service.⁹⁶

In the south, in areas where reconciliation agreements have been signed, local agreements included a conscription 'grace period' of six months to take care of practical matters before starting their period of military service.⁹⁷

However, one source claimed that the process is different for mid-service GoS military/security force defectors than for civilians, including those who have not served their military service. For non-

⁹⁰ Haid, H., The details of 'reconciliation deals' expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

⁹¹ Enab Baladi, Al-nidham yarfud taswiat awda'a 400 shakhs fi rif Homs (The regime refuses the settling of the status of 400 persons from outer Homs), 24 September 2018, [url](#)

⁹² Hassan, M., How Russia and the regime manipulate the reconciliation process in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, Chatham House, February 2019, [url](#)

⁹³ Hassan, M., How Russia and the regime manipulate the reconciliation process in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, Chatham House, February 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁴ Syria Direct, After relentless bombardment, two northwest Damascus towns give up and the evacuations begin, 13 October 2016, [url](#)

⁹⁵ TIMEP, TIMEP brief: Conscription law, 22 August 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁶ Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Reaksjoner mot desertører og personer som unndrar seg militærtjeneste (Syria: Reactions against deserters and draft evaders), 3 January 2018, [url](#), pp. 12-13

⁹⁷ International Crisis Group, Lessons from the Syrian state's Return to the South, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 10

civilians who meet the conditions, the reconciliation process starts immediately. They are given 30 days to clarify their status, before being sent back to the same unit or to a new unit to continue their service.⁹⁸

2.7.1 Forms of military service

Under Syrian law, it is not possible to serve a period of military service in other places than in the regular armed forces, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). However, a number of militias have emerged whose ties to the SAA and the GoS are so close that, in practice, it is possible to join one of the militias rather than to serve in the ordinary manner.⁹⁹

2.7.1.1 Pro-government militias consisting of former rebels

In several places, armed rebel groups have switched sides in the conflict as part of a reconciliation agreement. The most well-known examples are in Daraa province, where many local rebel groups have been incorporated into the 5th Corps of the SAA (see section [3.2](#)). The 5th Corps is a special army branch that Russian forces actively helped to establish and that recruits from other parts of the population than the regular SAA branches. It consists of individuals who have already completed their military service, civil servants, former militia members and, notably, former rebels.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Hassan, M., How Russia and the regime manipulate the reconciliation process in Deir Ez-Zor Governorate, Chatham House, February 2019, [url](#)

⁹⁹ For more information about pro-regime militias, see: Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Regimeløjale militser (Militias loyal to the regime), 2 November 2017, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁰⁰ Al Jabassini, A., From insurgents to soldiers: The fifth assault corps in Daraa, southern Syria, 2019, [url](#), pp. 5, 8

3. After the reconciliation agreement

The aim of the reconciliation agreements for GoS and the Russian forces is to have the areas concerned reincorporated into the state¹⁰¹, which will also entail the re-establishment of public services such as power supply and other services. The population in the areas expects the security situation to improve, and thereby to be ensured access to food and other vital supplies.¹⁰² Men of conscript age in the area must undergo military service, one way or another.¹⁰³

This part of the report looks more closely at the situation after the signing of reconciliation agreements. How GoS treats these areas varies considerably, and each respective area is therefore discussed separately. Not all cities are included, but rather a selection that serves to illustrate the different developments.

3.1 Damascus and Ghouta/Rural Damascus

This is a large area, in which the last parts of Eastern Ghouta were captured by the SAA in spring 2018.¹⁰⁴ By then, cities in Western Ghouta, such as Darayya and Muadamiyat, had already signed reconciliation agreements, but with widely varying outcomes.¹⁰⁵

3.1.1 Darayya

SAA took over this city in Western Ghouta in 2016, after a prolonged siege. When the conflict in Syria broke out, the city, which is situated seven kilometres from the centre of Damascus, had a population of 80–250 000¹⁰⁶, which had been reduced to between 2 500 to 4 000 people by August 2016.¹⁰⁷ During the siege, many of the city's inhabitants fled to the neighbouring city of Muadamiyat¹⁰⁸, or to parts of Damascus and the surroundings under GoS' control.¹⁰⁹ Locals were in practice forced to sign an agreement with GoS, given GoS's military superiority and a population that was completely exhausted after years under siege. In the agreement between local rebels and GoS, the inhabitants were given two options. They could either go to Idlib or be evacuated to a reception centre outside Damascus, in an area controlled by GoS. The majority of the remaining population chose to go to Idlib, while the rest were evacuated to the reception centre in al-Horjila.¹¹⁰

This means that Darayya is one of the places that were emptied of people; even those who left the area before the sieges began have not been allowed to return. People with military contacts were allowed to go to the area to check on their properties, but reportedly found their homes empty.¹¹¹ Other sources also reported pillaging after the evacuation.¹¹²

¹⁰¹ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁰² Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria's reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁰³ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 12

¹⁰⁴ Telegraph (The), Syrian flag flying over onetime rebel stronghold Douma as Russians announce victory in Eastern Ghouta, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁰⁵ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, [url](#), p. 30; Reuters, Former Syrian rebels flee, hide from army conscription, 10 August 2017, [url](#)

¹⁰⁶ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁰⁷ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁰⁸ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 20

¹⁰⁹ Guardian (The), Iran repopulate Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control, 14 January 2017, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 31

¹¹¹ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 32

¹¹² Al Modon, Fourth division, Shiite militias accused of looting Daraya, 9 September 2016, [url](#)

3.1.1.2 Consequences for the population

In 2017, sources reported that Iraqi Shia families were repopulating the area¹¹³; probably militia members and their families¹¹⁴, as the move was overseen by the Hizbullah al-Nujaba-militia.¹¹⁵ The displacement of the original, mainly Sunni population by Shia militia members and their families is a very sensitive issue that no GoS representatives will confirm is taking place.¹¹⁶ The Guardian also claimed that the offices of the city's property register were burned down, making it difficult for many of the original inhabitants to reclaim their properties.¹¹⁷

Citing the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), Reuters reported in summer 2018 that the population had been allowed to return to Darayya, but could not confirm how many this concerned or who they were.¹¹⁸ As of March 2019, the area was still characterised by extensive destruction.¹¹⁹

Sources quoted by Human Rights Watch claimed, however, that only individuals who had registered with the authorities in advance were allowed to return. They were given the chance to enter Darayya through a specific checkpoint, and for one day only, to check on their properties.¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch also reported that GoS unlawfully demolished houses of residents 'without providing notice, alternative housing, or compensation'.¹²¹

In December 2018, SANA reported that several hundred families had returned to Darayya over a few days, according to the city's mayor Marwan Obayd, who said that the water supply for the area would soon be restored, and that generators had been brought in to secure the power supply. He also said that four schools with a capacity of 4 000 pupils were up and running, and that there were plans to rehabilitate or build ten more schools.¹²²

Landinfo is unable to confirm which parts of Darayya this concerned, since several other sources reported that the city would be rebuilt in accordance with Decree 66/2012.¹²³ The purpose of the decree was 'to redevelop areas of unauthorised housing and informal settlements [slum]' (Mudiriyyat tanfidh al-marsum 66, 2012)¹²⁴, while critics claimed that it was an instrument aimed at forcing the original population to relocate.¹²⁵

3.1.2 Muadamiyat al-Sham

This is the neighbouring city to Darayya, where a reconciliation agreement was signed in October 2016, resulting in 420 armed rebels and their families being evacuated to Idlib. In addition, 200 rebels from Darayya, al-Mazza and Kafr Sousa and their families, who had previously fled to Muadamiyat,

¹¹³ Guardian (The), Iran repopulate Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control, 14 January 2017, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

¹¹⁵ Syrian Observer (The), Iraqi Shiite Militias Seeking Demographic Change in Syria, 7 September 2016, [url](#); Now, Iraqi families moving into Damascus suburb, 14 November 2016, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

¹¹⁷ Guardian (The), Iran repopulate Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control, 14 January 2017, [url](#)

¹¹⁸ Reuters, Thousands of Syrians start returning to Daraya: state media, 28 August 2018, [url](#)

¹¹⁹ PAX (Author), published by ReliefWeb: Siege Watch: Final Report – Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Aftermath of Syria's Sieges, 6 March 2019, [url](#), p. 53

¹²⁰ HRW, Syria: Residents blocked from returning, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

¹²¹ HRW, World Report 2019 - Syria, 17 January 2019, [url](#)

¹²² SANA, Hundreds of families return to the liberated Daraya city in Damascus countryside, 12 December 2018, [url](#)

¹²³ New Humanitarian (The), Decree 66: The blueprint for al-Assad's reconstruction of Syria, 20 April 2017, [url](#); Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 33; Al Iqtisadi, Muhafadhat Dimashq tu'linu 'an mukhattat Basiliya Siti al-tandhimi al-mufassal (Damascus province announces detailed regulation plans for Basilia City), 16 July 2018, [url](#)

¹²⁴ Mudiriyyat tanfidh al-marsum 66, Al-marsum al-tashri'i raqm 66 li-am 2012, 18 September 2012, [url](#)

¹²⁵ New Humanitarian (The), Decree 66: The blueprint for al-Assad's reconstruction of Syria, 20 April 2017, [url](#); Al 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 33

were evacuated. At the time that the agreement entered into force, the city had been under siege for ten months, and the humanitarian situation was desperate.¹²⁶

Unlike in Darayya, Muadamiyat was not emptied of its population, and, according to figures provided by the chair of the reconciliation committee, more than 2 500 rebel soldiers and draft evaders remained in the city to 'have their situation clarified'.¹²⁷

3.1.2.1 Consequences for the population

After the reconciliation agreement, responsibility for the city reportedly rested with the 4th Armoured Division under the command of Maher al-Assad. In July 2019, responsibility was taken over by the military intelligence branch led by Kafah Malham. The city's reconciliation committee was said to have been informed of this at a meeting with Ali Mamlouk¹²⁸, one of the most powerful men in Syria and head of the National Security Bureau; he was promoted to vice-President a couple of weeks after this meeting.¹²⁹

IDP integration to places of return has not been easy and there has been 'no massive return' to areas of origin that have been retaken by GoS; however, a source described Muadamiyat and the neighbouring city of Qudsaya as exceptions, because the population has returned to a far greater extent there. Many of the inhabitants of these areas returned, likely due to cheaper rents in adjacent cities than in Damascus city.¹³⁰

According to pro-opposition sources reporting in June-July 2019, the Syrian government continued to arrest persons perceived to be involved in activities against the government¹³¹ and security clearances were imposed on residents and IDPs that travelled to or out of the city.¹³²

3.1.3 Qudsaya

Al-Hamah and the neighbouring town of Qudsaya signed an agreement with GoS in October 2016, after which around 2 500 people from both towns were evacuated to Idlib, including both rebel soldiers and their families. Persons who had 'only' evaded military service but not joined an armed group were not allowed to leave the area.¹³³ After the evacuation, more than 200 000 people reportedly remained in the town.¹³⁴

Prior to the signing of the reconciliation agreement, the local population had held several demonstrations in which they rejected the violence from both the GoS and opposition sides. People encouraged the rebels to sign an agreement to spare the town from more warfare.¹³⁵

¹²⁶ Siege Watch, Second quarterly report on besieged areas in Syria, May 2016, [url](#), p. 27

¹²⁷ Al Hurra, Ijla' 620 musallahan min Mu'addamiyyat al-Sham qurba Dimashq (620 armed evacuated from Mu'addamiyyat al-Sham near Damascus), 19 October 2016, [url](#)

¹²⁸ Nida Suriya, Tatawwurat kabira fi Mu'addamiyyat al-Sham... 'Rusia tantazu'ha min Iran wa 'Ali Mamluk yajtama'u bi-mumathili al-madina (Major developments in Muadamiyyat al-Sham...Russia takes over from Iran and Ali Mamlouk meets representatives from the city), 2 July 2019, [url](#)

¹²⁹ Khalifeh, P., Syria war: Why did Assad restructure the military-security apparatus?, Middle East Eye, 17 July 2019, [url](#)

¹³⁰ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 10

¹³¹ Syrian Observer (The), Assad's Security Advisor Demands Local Committees Forget 'Detainees Issue', 4 July 2019, [url](#)

¹³² SOHR, The regime forces clamp down even more on Muadamiyat al-Sham west of the capital Damascus through forcing residents and displaced people to obtain security approvals, 22 June 2019, [url](#)

¹³³ Syria Direct, After relentless bombardment, two northwest Damascus towns give up and the evacuations begin, 13 October 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁴ Syria Direct, Rebels leave, but roads still closed as regime governor calls Qudsaya agreement a 'pardon, not a reconciliation', 18 October 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁵ Al Monitor, Militants from Syria's Qudsaya prepare to leave for Idlib, 14 October 2016, [url](#)

It is worth noting that the governor of Rural Damascus, Ala Ibrahim, stated that the agreement entered into in Qudsaya and al-Hamah was not a reconciliation agreement, but an agreement on forgiveness/amnesty (*musamaha*).¹³⁶

3.1.3.1 Consequences for the population

Shortly after the reconciliation agreement was signed, the area was opened up and food supplies allowed back in¹³⁷, but the checkpoints into and out of the area were still heavily manned.¹³⁸ Qudsaya was reportedly under the control of the 101st Brigade of the Republican Guard since the beginning of the agreement, and in October 2018, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) reported that it was in the process of disbanding militias affiliated to the National Defence Forces (NDF)¹³⁹ in the area.¹⁴⁰ In April 2019, however, the same source reported that the NDF, whose members are from Qudsaya, was still present in the city and carried out patrols and manned checkpoints together with the Republican Guard.¹⁴¹

In the same way as other places, draft evaders here have to complete military service.¹⁴² In connection with the reconciliation process, in which members of armed rebel groups who chose to stay had to clarify their status with GoS, they were reportedly given a promise that they would not be sent to the front lines, but be allowed to serve their military service nearby. In October 2018, SOHR reported that the leadership of the 101st Brigade was carrying out a campaign in Qudsaya to locate people wanted for evasion of both initial military service and service in the reserve force.¹⁴³ In July 2019, the same source reported that in June the security service had arrested two former commanders of the rebel faction Shuhada al-Asimah Brigade, who had both signed reconciliation agreements and joined the Republican Guard. They accused the men of killing informants and members of the GoS during the time when the armed faction had been in control of parts of the area.¹⁴⁴

3.1.4 Madaya/Zabadani

These two neighbouring towns are situated on the outskirts of Rural Damascus governorate, not far from the Lebanese border. Developments in the two towns are closely related, and they were part of what was known as the Four Towns Agreement together with Fuhah and Kafriya. The two latter towns are in Idlib province, and the population is predominantly Shia.¹⁴⁵ Both were controlled by GoS and besieged by rebels and HTS.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁶ SANA, Muhafidh Rif Dimashq yatalla'u ala waqi' al-khidamat fi Qudsaya ba'da ikhlaiha min al-silah wal-musallahin w-awdat al-hayat al-tabi'iyya ilayha (Governor of Rif Dimashq inspects services in Qudsaya after the city has been emptied of weapons and armed persons, and has returned to normal daily life), 17 October 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁷ Syria Direct, After relentless bombardment, two northwest Damascus towns give up and the evacuations begin, 13 October 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁸ CBS News, 'Reconciliations' provide relief from fighting in towns near Damascus, 21 November 2016, [url](#)

¹³⁹ The NDF (National Defence Forces, Arabic: *Quwat al-difa' al-watani*) is made up of a number of pro-government militias that have fought together with the SAA. They have often been referred to, somewhat imprecisely, as *shabiha* – ghosts. See Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Regimeløst militser (Militias loyal to the regime), 2 November 2017, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁴⁰ SOHR, Regime's intelligence raid Damascus suburbs and the republican Guard pulls the 'reconciliation' fighters towards their barracks, 12 October 2018, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ SOHR, Tafjir yastahdif dhabit min al-mukhabarat al-siyasiya fi quwat al-nidham fi dahiya Qudsaya wa-yatasabbab bi-maqtalihi (An explosion targeting an officer from the political intelligence of the Syrian regime in the outskirts of Qudsaya caused his death), 16 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴² NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

¹⁴³ SOHR, Regime's intelligence raid Damascus suburbs and the republican Guard pulls the 'reconciliation' fighters towards their barracks, 12 October 2018, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴ SOHR, The regime's security services arrests commanders and fighters of those who stuck "reconciliation and settlement" deals in the south of Damascus, 23 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴⁵ AI, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 60

¹⁴⁶ UNOCHA, Turkey/Syria: Four towns evacuation (as of 20 April 2017), 20 April 2017, [url](#), pp. 1-3

Sources reported in 2015 that the people of Zabadani were forced to flee to Madaya, some of whom were also reportedly from Bludan, a nearby town. There were also reports of negotiations on a reconciliation agreement in the same year, but this was allegedly blocked by Hezbollah with support from Iran. The aim was to be in full control of the town, which is in a strategic location¹⁴⁷ and has been important to the group since long before the uprising started in 2011.¹⁴⁸ The year before, the local reconciliation committee had to mediate between two pro-GoS groups when conflict broke out in connection with the attempt to reach an agreement.¹⁴⁹

When the agreement was finally signed in 2017, a source claimed it had been brokered by Qatar and Iran, without the involvement of Russians or GoS.¹⁵⁰ Another source claims that it was signed by jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham and HTS, on the one hand, and Hezbollah, Iran and GoS, on the other.¹⁵¹ It stipulated that the population of Fuah and Kafriya had to leave their homes, while the population of Madaya was given the choice of leaving the town or being reconciled with GoS.¹⁵² The agreement seemed to be in jeopardy when on 15 April 2017 a bomb killed more than one hundred bus passengers on their way from Fuah and Kafriya to Aleppo, but the evacuation was completed.¹⁵³ The majority of the population of Madaya chose to stay and reconcile with GoS; while just over 2 000 people were reportedly bussed to Idlib, and around 40 000 stayed.¹⁵⁴ According to the same source, the plan was to empty Zabadani of its population.

The agreement included the release of several hundred prisoners on both sides. Prisoner exchanges are not unusual in reconciliation agreements, although these also take place outside the framework of such agreements.¹⁵⁵ The high number of prisoners exchanged in this example was notable: 1 500 prisoners were released and sent to Idlib in July 2018¹⁵⁶, while 750 prisoners had been sent to the same place in December 2017.¹⁵⁷

3.1.4.1 Consequences for the population

Antagonists of GoS both expected and feared that the Four Towns Agreement would be the first step in the direction of population resettlement, where rebel-held areas with a Sunni majority population would be completely evacuated and repopulated by other groups loyal to the government. In this case, the assumption was that the areas would be repopulated by Shias, including from the two towns in Idlib and elsewhere.¹⁵⁸ Iran reportedly pushed for such a population resettlement at one point.¹⁵⁹

The two towns in Idlib, Fuah and Kafriya, were emptied in summer 2018 when the last of the inhabitants left. They were initially taken to Aleppo, but Landinfo has found no evidence that the population of the two towns have been relocated in Zabadani or Madaya.¹⁶⁰ A source claimed that a

¹⁴⁷ Al Monitor, Syrian regime displaces Zabadani residents, 15 September 2015, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸ Alami, M., Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria and its wider regional role, March 2017, [url](#), p. 19; Tokmajyan, A., Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria, December 2014, [url](#), p. 110

¹⁴⁹ Adleh, F. and Favier, A., "Local reconciliation agreements" in Syria: A non-starter for peacebuilding, European University Institute, June 2017, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁵⁰ Beals, E., Syria's cruel 'reconciliations', The Daily Beast, 9 December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵¹ Arfeh, H., The institutionalization of demographic change in Syria, Atlantic Council, 4 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵² France 24, Thousands of Syrian evacuated under Qatar – Iran deal, 14 April 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵³ BBC, Syria war: 'At least 68 children among 126 killed' in bus bombing, 17 April 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ France 24, Thousands of Syrian evacuated under Qatar – Iran deal, 14 April 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵⁵ SOHR, Sednaya prison continues to claim the lives of Syrians by killing 2 citizens under torture after being arrested by regime's intelligence previously, 18 August 2019, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶ Al Monitor, Prisoners exchanged for evacuees from pro-regime towns in Syrian north, 25 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ Beals, E., Syria's cruel 'reconciliations'. 9 December 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸ Guardian (The), Iran repopulate Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control, 14 January 2017, [url](#)

¹⁵⁹ Araabi, S. and Hilal, L., Reconciliation, reward and revenge – Analyzing Syrian de-escalation dynamics through local ceasefire agreements, Cambridge, MA: Conflict Dynamics International, 2016, [url](#)

¹⁶⁰ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

large part of the population then lived in Hisya and al-Basit in the Homs district, the Aleppo area, including the two Shia towns of Nubl and Zahra, as well as in Damascus.¹⁶¹

In November 2018, the leader of the local council in Zabadani stated that 4 500 families had returned to the town, and that 600 homes had been rehabilitated. He also stated that major rehabilitation work was under way on all parts of the town's infrastructure.¹⁶² From an unofficial Facebook page dedicated to the town, such as *Mahalliyyat fi al-Zabadani* ('local [events] in al-Zabadani')¹⁶³, it is evident that some of the town's inhabitants were still in Lebanon. A Facebook post, dated 29 July 2019, described the poor conditions for Syrians in Lebanon, and claims that more and more of the town's population are returning home. It also claimed that many young men (*shabab*) who are supposed to have served in the military or the reserve force are returning. They were granted authorisation (*taklif*) at the border and told to contact the enlistment office in Zabadani within 15 days to complete their compulsory military or reserve service.¹⁶⁴ Other posts from October 2019 posted by the same Facebook account indicated more returns from Lebanon to Zabadani.¹⁶⁵ Landinfo has been unable to verify this information.

It is also evident that the repairs to the town's water pipes are far from completed.¹⁶⁶ A post from late May 2019 refers to widespread dissatisfaction with the water supply.¹⁶⁷

According to residents and refugees from Zabadani interviewed by the European Institute of Peace (EIP) during autumn 2018 and February 2019, the majority of returns to Zabadani were reportedly of persons from the Damascus area or from nearby Bludan town, who were supportive of the GoS and have left the town before it fell to the armed opposition in 2012. Local sources noted that these returnees weren't subjected to the reconciliation process. Refugees interviewed by EIP claimed that around 350 persons had returned from Lebanon to Zabadani, during July-September 2018.¹⁶⁸

Refugees from Zabadani interviewed by EIP claimed that there been cases of GoS arresting individuals who undertook reconciliations required for returning to the town, most of them being subsequently released, while others remained missing. Arrests of those who made contact with relatives in Idlib were also reported.¹⁶⁹

The situation in Madaya is different, given that a substantial proportion of the population did not leave the city. The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) noted in a May 2019 report that 'Madaya is full of residents, while activity in its commercial district is picking up again'.¹⁷⁰ Several local community Facebook pages give the impression that people go about their daily lives and show a lot more people on the streets and cars on the roads than corresponding pages for Zabadani.¹⁷¹

SOHR reported in October 2018 that the Syrian intelligence services reportedly arrested over 40 civilians in Madaya for unknown reasons.¹⁷²

¹⁶¹ Al Tamimi, A., Exile from Kafariya: Interview, 10 September 2018, [url](#)

¹⁶² SANA, Al-Zabadani municipality: 4,500 families returned to city, maintenance work continues, 11 November 2018, [url](#)

¹⁶³ Mahalliyyat fi al-Zabadani (Local news in Zabadani) [Facebook], [url](#)

¹⁶⁴ Mahalliyyat fi al-Zabadani, [Facebook], posted on: 29 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁵ Mahalliyyat fi al-Zabadani, [Facebook], posted on: 10 October 2019, [url](#); Mahalliyyat fi al-Zabadani, [Facebook], posted on: 4 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁶ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

¹⁶⁷ Mahalliyyat fi al-Zabadani, [Facebook], posted on: 29 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁶⁸ EIP, Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 25-26

¹⁶⁹ EIP, Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 25-26

¹⁷⁰ Samaha, N., Can Assad Win Peace?, ECFR, May 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁷¹ Majlis baladiyat Madaya (The municipal council of Madaya), [Facebook], posted on: n.d. [url](#); Madaya, [Facebook], posted on: n.d., [url](#)

¹⁷² SOHR, In the Eastern Ghouta, regime's intelligence arrest 45 people and informs about 100 others that they must check with their security branches in Damascus, 17 October 2018, [url](#)

3.1.5 Douma

Douma is the biggest city in Eastern Ghouta, and it had been besieged for several years before an agreement was negotiated in April 2018.¹⁷³ Negotiations had been ongoing since the month before, but the Jaysh al-Islam rebel group, which controlled Douma, broke the negotiations on 6 April. The aerial bombardment of the city was immediately resumed. The day after, a chemical attack was carried out allegedly with chlorine gas, according to some sources.¹⁷⁴ Other sources cited by the Independent said that no such attack took place¹⁷⁵, but negotiations on an agreement were almost immediately resumed, and a spokesperson from Jaysh al-Islam stated that it was due to the presumed gas attack.¹⁷⁶

According to Russian forces, which contributed actively to negotiating the deal, a total of 21 145 rebel soldiers and their families left the city. The last of them left Douma on 13 April 2018.¹⁷⁷

In the period leading up to this, Douma and the other cities in Eastern Ghouta had been under intensive bombardment from the SAA and Russian forces.¹⁷⁸ In March 2018, humanitarian corridors were opened for the population of some of the towns. The corridors, which were initiated by Russian forces, led to reception centres where the inhabitants who fled were registered and given food and water. Before being allowed into the centres, they had to undergo a quick screening, due to fears that IS members were hiding among the civilians.¹⁷⁹ They were later screened by representatives of Syrian authorities present in these centres, and those who sought refuge there were not allowed to leave the centres before being granted permission by the authorities. An international organisation informed Landinfo that eleven such centres were established to receive refugees from Eastern Ghouta, not just from Douma. Several of them were run by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).¹⁸⁰

The centres quickly became very crowded, as people were waiting to be screened, which was confirmed in Landinfo's meetings with various actors in Damascus in March 2018. A representative of an international organisation described the situation in one of the centres as 'apocalyptic'.¹⁸¹ Mothers with children under the age of 15 were prioritised in the screening, and were allowed to leave the centres if they found a sponsor who could guarantee for them.¹⁸² It was reported in April 2018 that 166 644 people fled from Douma via the humanitarian corridors.¹⁸³

3.1.5.1 Consequences for the population

The level of destruction in Douma and the rest of Eastern Ghouta is enormous, which Landinfo also observed during a visit in April 2019. Despite this, an international organisation that Landinfo met estimated that around 300 000 people are living in the city districts and cities in Eastern Ghouta, including Douma. The same organisation confirmed that access to the areas was much better now than before, but that people still have to apply for permission every time they want to visit the area.¹⁸⁴ This was confirmed by another international organisation, which stated that around half of its

¹⁷³ Guardian (The), Douma inhabitants prepare to leave after deadly chemical attack, 9 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁴ BBC, What we know about Douma 'chemical attack', 10 July 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁵ Independent (The), The search for truth in the rubble of Douma – and one doctor's doubts over the chemical attack, 17 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁶ Telegraph (The), Syrian flag flying over onetime rebel stronghold Douma as Russians announce victory in Eastern Ghouta, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷ CROSS, Briefing by Center for reconciliation of Opposing sides in Syria (April 14, 2018), 14 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁸ Telegraph (The), Syrian flag flying over onetime rebel stronghold Douma as Russians announce victory in Eastern Ghouta, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷⁹ NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation c, Damascus, March 2018

¹⁸⁰ NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation a, Damascus, March 2018

¹⁸¹ NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation b, Damascus, March 2018

¹⁸² NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation a, Damascus, March 2018

¹⁸³ Telegraph (The), Syrian flag flying over onetime rebel stronghold Douma as Russians announce victory in Eastern Ghouta, 12 April 2018, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴ NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation c, Damascus, April 2019

requests for access to Eastern Ghouta were granted by GoS. The same organisation pointed out that it is more difficult to fund aid for the area than it was before GoS took control.¹⁸⁵

GoS has reopened schools in different places in the area¹⁸⁶, but Landinfo has been unable to confirm whether all children in the area are offered schooling.

There are major challenges associated with civil registration in both Douma and the rest of Eastern Ghouta, after the area has been controlled by rebel groups for several years. Legal experts from SARC were present at the reception centres to start the process of issuing identity papers recognised by GoS.¹⁸⁷ Papers issued by local councils in the area are seen as an indication that an event has taken place, but it is still necessary to go through the courts to register births, marriages, divorces, deaths etc.¹⁸⁸

Up until the end of April 2019, the inhabitants who remained in Douma and people from the outside who wanted to visit the area needed security clearance to pass the checkpoints on the outskirts of the city. People living in Douma had to apply to the officer responsible for the city to leave the area, and state their reason for leaving. According to the opposition website Enab Baladi, these regulations were lifted on 26 April 2019, and the information was published on the local council's website. The regulations were lifted due to efforts of the governor of Rural Damascus province¹⁸⁹, Ala Munir Ibrahim, and Muhammad Khayr Saryul, a member of parliament from Douma.¹⁹⁰

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Col) noted in a report covering the period January to July 2019 that in Douma the majority of residents were required to obtain permission to travel to Damascus. According to interviewees by Col, GoS checkpoints were present throughout the city and soldiers manning the checkpoints reportedly had access to a computerized system to track movements of civilians. Residents also alleged that the GoS forces were monitoring their phones.¹⁹¹ According to other sources, as of July 2019 inhabitants who wished to leave Douma still needed to apply for a permit.¹⁹²

The Col noted in the report that government forces conducted a campaign of arbitrary arrests upon securing control of Douma.¹⁹³

One source reported campaigns of arrests mainly targeting people who are to undergo military service.¹⁹⁴ Landinfo assumes that the arrests concern people who have failed to report for service at the stated time.¹⁹⁵ The same source reported that persons who worked with the local council during the blockade, persons affiliated to Syria Civil Defence (the White Helmets) and persons who have been

¹⁸⁵ NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation b, Damascus, April 2019

¹⁸⁶ NO-Landinfo interview with International organisation c, Damascus, April 2019

¹⁸⁷ NO-Landinfo interview with Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), Damascus, April 2019

¹⁸⁸ For more information about civil registration, see Norway, Landinfo, Syria: Identitetsdokumenter og pass (ID documents and passports), July 2017, [url](#), pp. 18-20

¹⁸⁹ Enab Baladi, Ba'da am... quwat al-Asad tasmahu bi-harakat ahali Duma duna muwafaqa amniya (After a year ... Asads forces allows local population from Duma freedom of movement without security clearance), 26 May 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁰ Majlis al-sha'b (People's Assembly), Adu majlis al-sha'b: Muhammad Khayr Saryul bin Subhi walidatuhu Fatima (Member of People's Assembly: Muhammad Khayr Saryul son of Subhi his mother is Fatima), n.d., [url](#)

¹⁹¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 September 2019, [url](#), pp. 13-14

¹⁹² Baladi, Al-nidham yutaba' al-siyasa al-'iqab al-jama'i fi ghuta Dimashq (The regime pursue the politic of mass obstruction in the Ghouta of Damascus), 27 June 2019, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Tashdid amni ala al-kharijin min al-Ghuta ila Dimashq (Increased security for those travelling from Ghouta to Damascus), 7 July 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/40/70], 31 January 2019, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁹⁴ Televiziyon Suriya, Ba'da 'am min saytarat nidham al-Asad 'ala Duma... ma zala al-hisar mustamirra (One year after the Asad regime took control over Douma...siege continues), 12 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

affiliated to an armed rebel group are also being arrested. Persons who have signed reconciliation agreements with GoS were also reported to have been arrested.¹⁹⁶

Sources also reported problems with the water and power supply.¹⁹⁷ The Col stated that in residential areas of Douma, the GoS did not supply electricity and the water was not potable.¹⁹⁸

Another source provided a description of the markets in Douma during Ramadan, which stated that, although there were goods available, including meat and vegetables, the prices were so high that people could not afford to shop, and the markets were therefore quiet.¹⁹⁹

3.1.6 Yalda, Babila and Bayt Sahm

These villages, which are now regarded as districts of Damascus, are located on a belt east of the Yarmouk area and Hajar al-Aswad (see [section 3.1.8](#)). They belong to Rural Damascus governorate, however, even though they are just a few kilometres from the centre of Damascus.²⁰⁰

The villages entered into agreements with GoS almost simultaneously in spring 2018, after GoS had launched a major offensive against rebel-held areas in Eastern Ghouta.²⁰¹ Russian forces reportedly played an active role in brokering the agreements.²⁰² This was not the first time rebels in the three villages had signed agreements with GoS. Already in spring 2014, the parties had agreed on a ceasefire in the three villages²⁰³, but supplies to the towns went through channels loyal to GoS, and there were concerns that the aid was only received by those loyal to GoS or was lost in corruption.²⁰⁴

An important factor in these villages was the role that local Muslim clerics played in the negotiations with GoS.²⁰⁵ Already in 2014, three clerics negotiated the ceasefire agreement, and managed to include emergency aid deliveries, the release of prisoners, and the transfer of sick people and residents' access to official documents. All three had been affiliated to opposition groups in the three villages, and were partly active in the administration of the areas during the period outside GoS control.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁶ Televiziyon Suriya, Ba'da 'am min saytarat nidham al-Asad 'ala Duma... ma zala al-hisar mustamirra (One year after the Asad regime took control over Douma...siege continues), 12 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷ Nida Suriya, Mu'ana kabira ya'ishuha ahali Duma bi-Rif Dimashq bi-sabab ihm al-nidham al-Asad.. birmil al-miyah bi-1000 lira suriyya (Population in Douma in Rif Damackus lives with major suffering due to the neglect of Asad regime... a bucket of water costs 1000 syrian pound), 30 July 2019, [url](#); Televiziyon Suriya, Ba'da 'am min saytarat nidham al-Asad 'ala Duma... ma zala al-hisar mustamirra (One year after the Asad regime took control over Douma...siege continues), 12 April 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁹⁹ Hassan, L., Fi dhull saytarat al-nidham... aswaq Duma mahjura fi ramadan (In the shadow of the Regime's control ... markets in Douma are deserted during Ramadan), 5 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁰ Marefa, Muhafadhat Rif Dimashq (The Governorate of Rif Dimashq), n.d., [url](#)

²⁰¹ Xinhua, Deal reaches for evacuation of rebels from 3 towns south of Syria's Damascus, 29 April 2018, [url](#)

²⁰² Zaman Al Wasl, Damascus: Military Security arrests former rebel commanders who agreed to reconciliation deal, 24 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁰³ Al Saidawi, H., How Syria's regime used local clerics to reassert its authority in Rural Damascus governorate, Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 March 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁴ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria's reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 9

²⁰⁵ Ezzi, M., How the Syrian regime is using the mask of 'reconciliation' to destroy opposition institutions, Chatham House, June 2017, [url](#)

²⁰⁶ Al Saidawi, H., How Syria's regime used local clerics to reassert its authority in Rural Damascus governorate, Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 March 2019, [url](#)

3.1.6.1 Consequences for the population

After a deal had been negotiated in spring 2018, around 8 400 people left the three villages in early May, according to SOHR.²⁰⁷ Another source said that about three hundred civilians left, while the rest were rebel soldiers and their families, who did not want to sign reconciliation agreements with GoS.²⁰⁸

In the negotiations, the clerics passed on guarantees from the GoS, including promises to not punish local residents and that those who had evaded military service would be granted a grace period before having to report for service.²⁰⁹

After GoS regained control of the three villages, the clerics' mosques were re-affiliated to the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*waqf/awqaf*) and they regained their former positions in the towns. The clerics continued to act as middlemen between the GoS and the local communities.²¹⁰

In summer 2019, reports were received that the Palestine Branch of the military intelligence service had arrested three former rebel commanders who had signed reconciliation agreements with GoS.²¹¹ Other unarmed members of the opposition and their family members had reportedly also been arrested, even though they had all signed reconciliation agreements.²¹²

3.1.7 Qadam

Qadam is not part of Eastern Ghouta, but belongs to the city of Damascus. The district is situated a few kilometres from both Darayya and the centre of Damascus, bordering on the city districts of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad.²¹³ Qadam is a special case, where an agreement between rebel groups and GoS was signed already in 2014, stipulating that the rebels would only stay in the western part of the area. This was before the Russian military intervention in Syria and before the reconciliation agreements, so the 2014 agreement did not entail disarmament of the rebels, nor the possibility of them clarifying their situation (*taswiyat al-wada*; see [section 2.5](#)).²¹⁴

Islamist and jihadist groups enjoyed a strong position in this area, and in 2015, IS took control of parts of Qadam, while other parts were controlled by HTS (al-Qaeda) and Ajnad al-Sham.²¹⁵ In 2016, a new agreement was signed, and some members of militant groups were evacuated to Idlib province, while others remained and joined pro-GoS forces.²¹⁶

After agreement was reached between GoS, on the one hand, and HTS and others, on the other, about 1 300 jihadists and their families were evacuated to Idlib in March 2018.²¹⁷ When GoS forces in March 2018 attempted to take over the parts of Qadam vacated by HTS, they were attacked by IS²¹⁸, which

²⁰⁷ Straits Times (The), Syria rebels exit towns near Damascus, leaving only ISIS, 11 May 2018, [url](#)

²⁰⁸ Al Saidawi, H., How Syria's regime used local clerics to reassert its authority in Rural Damascus governorate, Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 March 2019, [url](#)

²⁰⁹ Al Saidawi, H., How Syria's regime used local clerics to reassert its authority in Rural Damascus governorate, Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 March 2019, [url](#)

²¹⁰ Al Saidawi, H., How Syria's regime used local clerics to reassert its authority in Rural Damascus governorate, Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 March 2019, [url](#)

²¹¹ Despite the name, the Palestine Branch does not just target Palestinians in Syria but is one of the biggest branches of the military intelligence service, with Islamist movements as its main focus. SNHR, Syrian security branches and persons in charge, n.d., [url](#)

²¹² Zaman Al Wasl, Damascus: Military Security arrests former rebel commanders who agreed to reconciliation deal, 24 July 2019, [url](#); HRW, Syria: Detention, harassment in retake areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²¹³ Marefa, Hayy al-Qadam (Al-Qadam neighborhood), n.d., [url](#)

²¹⁴ Al Monitor, The peculiar case of Syria's al-Qadam neighbourhood, 2 September 2015, [url](#); NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

²¹⁵ Al Monitor, The peculiar case of Syria's al-Qadam neighbourhood, 2 September 2015, [url](#)

²¹⁶ AFP, Syria rebels leave al-Qadam south of Damascus, Zaman Al Wasl, 13 March 2018, [url](#)

²¹⁷ AFP, Syria rebels leave al-Qadam south of Damascus, Zaman Al Wasl, 13 March 2018, [url](#)

²¹⁸ Syrian Observer (The), ISIS takes place of HTS in al-Qadam south of Damascus, 29 March 2018, [url](#)

managed to hold the area for some time. In April 2018, GoS regained control of Qadam²¹⁹, and as of October 2019 remained in control of the district.²²⁰

3.1.7.1 Consequences for the population

Qadam saw extensive destruction, notably after the clashes with IS in 2018.²²¹ Parts of the population who had fled the area early in the conflict returned in 2016²²², but fled again when the agreement between GoS and the rebels broke down, or when a deal between the rebels and GoS concluded in 2017 was implemented in the spring of 2018.²²³

Some areas in Qadam were reportedly zoned for reconstruction under Decree 66/2012, issued by Bashar al-Assad, under the name Basilia City. Critics of GoS see the decree and Law 10/2018 as punishment against areas where the civil uprising in 2011 quickly gained strong support. The law provides for the possibility of expropriating land and establishing public-private companies to develop the areas. The critics also pointed out that these private-public projects would benefit Russian investors, on the one hand, while in other places, there were fears of large-scale acquisitions by Iran.²²⁴ For its part, GoS claimed that it was an expedient way of rebuilding the country, while also addressing the problem of houses built in areas not zoned for housing.²²⁵

3.1.8 Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad

These are also districts of Damascus, and before the conflict broke out, Yarmouk was home to one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, housing almost 160 000 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)-registered Palestinian refugees. A large number of Syrians also lived in the area, which had the status of an ‘unofficial’ refugee camp, which means that, in practice, GoS was responsible for the infrastructure there to a far greater extent than in official camps.²²⁶

Yarmouk camp was the scene of major protests already in 2011, and in June that year, the headquarters of one of the pro-GoS Palestinian factions (PFLP-GC) in the camp was burned to the ground by furious protesters.²²⁷ Fierce fighting erupted in December 2012, causing around 140 000 Palestinians and thousands of Syrians to flee the area.²²⁸ In summer 2013, Yarmouk was besieged by GoS.²²⁹ and UNRWA was unable to access the camp until six months later.²³⁰

In 2015, IS and other Islamist-jihadi groups took control of large parts of the camp²³¹, which again caused thousands to flee to the neighbouring districts of Babila, Bayt Sahm, Yalda and Tadamon, with the result that UNRWA was only able to provide limited medical services in these districts.²³²

²¹⁹ Siege Watch, Tenth quarterly report, part 2 – The culmination of ‘Surrender or die’, June 2018, [url](#)

²²⁰ Liveuamap, Syria, 1 October 2019, [url](#)

²²¹ Xinhua, Destruction seen in captured areas in S Damascus, 30 April 2018, [url](#)

²²² AP, Amid truce, Syrians return to gutted Damascus ghost towns, Islamic State ranks exit Palestinian ghetto, Japan Times (The), 16 January 2016, [url](#)

²²³ AFP, Syria rebels leave al-Qadam south of Damascus, Zaman Al Wasl, 13 March 2018, [url](#)

²²⁴ Asharq al-Awsat, Rusiya tunafisu Iran ‘ala i’-mari Suriya wa-tajmudu “al-dahiya al-janubiyya” fi Dimashq (Russia competes with Iran in the rebuilding of Syria and is inflexible in the southern outskirts of Damascus), 20 September 2018, [url](#)

²²⁵ Syrian Law Journal, The new urban renewal law in Syria, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

²²⁶ UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), n.d., [url](#); UN, The question of Palestine. Almost all UNRWA installations in Yarmouk and Dera’a camp in Syria severely damaged or destroyed – Press release, 1 December 2018, [url](#); NO-Landinfo interview with UNRWA, Damascus, April 2019

²²⁷ Baitari, N., Yarmouk refugee camp and the Syrian uprising: A view from within, Autumn 2013, [url](#)

²²⁸ UNRWA, The crisis in Yarmouk camp, n.d., [url](#)

²²⁹ Hall, N., Palestinian refugees and the siege of Yarmouk, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 March 2014, [url](#)

²³⁰ UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), n.d., [url](#)

²³¹ Al Khalidi, S., Islamic State withdraws from Yarmouk camp, Nusra remains: residents. Reuters, 15 April 2015, [url](#)

²³² UNRWA, Yarmouk (unofficial camp), n.d., [url](#)

In spring 2018, the Syrian government launched an offensive to recapture these areas after having regained control of the other areas in and around Damascus that had been outside GoS control. In early May, a new agreement was entered into, and up to five thousand people were evacuated to Jarabulus, north of Aleppo, controlled by armed groups backed by Turkey.²³³ Other sources quoted much higher figures and claimed that some of the evacuees were allowed to go to Daraa and not northern Syria.²³⁴ With this, the capital city and the surrounding areas were completely cleansed of armed resistance against GoS.²³⁵

3.1.8.1 Consequences for the population

Sources Landinfo met with in Damascus in spring 2019 agreed that the level of destruction in Yarmouk is extensive. UNRWA stated in a meeting with Landinfo that all the organisation's buildings in the camp had been damaged. According to estimates, between 40 and 60 % of the camp was completely destroyed.²³⁶

There were also reports of inhabitants remaining in the area, but how many is unknown. Estimates varied from 90 families to up to 4 000 people. UNRWA told Landinfo that it does not know the identity of these individuals, except for some elderly Palestinian refugees who stayed in the camp throughout the siege and conflict.²³⁷

Sources in 2019 reported that it is possible for people from Yarmouk to enter the camp to check the condition of houses or other property. To do so, they have to leave their ID card at one of the checkpoints on the way into the camp and pick it up on their way out.²³⁸ One source claimed that Palestinians who wish to leave the southern districts of Damascus need permission from the security forces.²³⁹

Around 6 000 people from Yarmouk fled to the neighbouring districts of Yalda, Bayt Sahm and Babila. UNRWA provides services here on a weekly basis, with doctors and dentists working out of mobile clinics.²⁴⁰

Several sources reported arrests, including of individuals who have signed reconciliation agreements with GoS.²⁴¹ In addition, relatives of individuals who were evacuated to Northern Syria (Idlib) were reportedly arrested.²⁴²

The reconstruction of the camp and the surrounding areas is a source of concern for impatient residents waiting to start rebuilding their homes. There are widespread fears that all or parts of Yarmouk will not be rebuilt, and that the area will be expropriated under Law 10 and turned into more exclusive residences and commercial areas.²⁴³

²³³ OHCHR, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Civilians in North-western Syria*, June 2018, [url](#), p. 1

²³⁴ Suriya ala tul, Muqatilu al-mu'arada yughadiruna akhir mu'aqalihim fi al-asima al-suriyya (Rebel soldiers leave last position in the Syrian capital), 5 May 2019, [url](#)

²³⁵ Reuters, *Syria's army recaptures last insurgent area near Damascus*, 21 May 2018, [url](#)

²³⁶ NO-Landinfo interview with UNRWA, Damascus, April 2019; NO-Landinfo interview with Abed al-Majid, Khalid, Alliance of Palestinian Resistance Forces, Damascus, April 2019

²³⁷ NO-Landinfo interview with UNRWA, Damascus, April 2019

²³⁸ Macharis O. and Asfar, R., *Palestinian refugees of Syria's Yarmouk camp: Challenges and obstacles to return*, 17 January 2019, [url](#); NO-Landinfo interview with UNRWA, Damascus, April 2019

²³⁹ Syria Direct, *On the anniversary of the peace deal in Southern Damascus "there is no amnesty, no reconciliation"*, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁰ NO-Landinfo interview with UNRWA, Damascus, April 2019

²⁴¹ Syria Direct, *On the anniversary of the peace deal in Southern Damascus "there is no amnesty, no reconciliation"*, 21 May 2019, [url](#); SOHR, *The regime's security services arrests commanders and fighters of those who stuck "reconciliation and settlement" deals in the south of Damascus*, 23 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁴² SOHR, *The regime's security services arrests commanders and fighters of those who stuck "reconciliation and settlement" deals in the south of Damascus*, 23 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁴³ Al Shimale, Z., *'No way back': The law that stops displaced Syrians from ever going home*, Middle East Eye, 8 April 2019, [url](#)

3.2 Daraa

Large parts of Daraa province had been outside GoS control when the government forces launched an offensive to regain control of the entire province in spring/early summer 2018.²⁴⁴ However, GoS had control of large sections of the M5 motorway, which goes from Damascus to Mafrq in Jordan via the Jabir checkpoint and parts of Daraa city had been under GoS control throughout the uprising and subsequent war. The result was that the area was split into two parts, straddling a wedge of land in the middle controlled by GoS.²⁴⁵

Daraa stands out as an area where Russian forces have been heavily involved in many of the reconciliation agreements that have been signed²⁴⁶, and where many former rebels have joined various pro-GoS groups as part of reconciliation agreements, notably the Syrian Army group known as the 5th Corps.²⁴⁷ Russian forces were instrumental in the establishment of this branch of the army, and continue to exert great influence on it.²⁴⁸

In addition, many former rebels who have not formally joined other groups, but kept their light weapons. The combination of these factors created a complicated, unstable situation in the governorate²⁴⁹, with frequent security-related events for which responsibility is uncertain.²⁵⁰

3.2.1 Al-Sanamayn

The city of al-Sanamayn is situated along the motorway between Damascus and Amman²⁵¹, and was one of the first in the country to enter into a reconciliation agreement.²⁵² The agreement was signed in December 2016, after parts of the city had been under siege several times. Al-Sanamayn is special because parts of the city have been under GoS control throughout the conflict, while various rebel groups have controlled other parts. Rebel groups continued their armed presence in the city after the reconciliation, but stopped attacking the government forces.²⁵³

Nor was the reconciliation agreement meant to include all the inhabitants; the idea was rather that all the families and clans had representatives who carried out a 'sorting out of affairs' (*taswiyat al-wada*; see sections 2.4 and 2.5).²⁵⁴ In total, 510 people from the city underwent this process, 150 of whom were said to have been armed rebels.²⁵⁵

3.2.1.1 Consequences for the population

After the reconciliation agreement was signed in December 2016, the sieges were lifted in the parts of the city that had been under rebel control. Most public services in Al-Sanamayn continued to be provided by the GoS throughout, such as identity papers, since only parts of the city had been held by

²⁴⁴ Maayeh, S., and Hares, N., The fall of Daraa, Foreign Affairs, 23 July 2018, [url](#)

²⁴⁵ Liveuamap, Syria, 1 May 2018, [url](#)

²⁴⁶ Makki, D., As violence flares up in Daraa, control can be an illusion, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁴⁷ Al Jabassini, A., From rebel rule to a post-capitulation era in Daraa southern Syria: The impacts and outcomes of rebel behaviour during negotiations, 2019, [url](#), pp. 10-11

²⁴⁸ Al Jabassini, A., From rebel rule to a post-capitulation era in Daraa southern Syria: The impacts and outcomes of rebel behaviour during negotiations, 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6

²⁴⁹ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

²⁵⁰ AFP, Cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south, Al Monitor, 29 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁵¹ Based on reading of UNOCHA, Dar'a governorate. Reference Map, December 2015, [url](#)

²⁵² Syrian Observer (The), Sanamayn City under siege, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁵³ Al Tamimi, A. J., Reconciliations: The case of al-Sanamayn in North-Deraa, 27 April 2017, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ Al Tamimi, A. J., Reconciliations: The case of al-Sanamayn in North-Deraa, 27 April 2017, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ SANA Syrian News Agency, Taswiyat awda' 510 ashkhas min madinat al-Sanamayn baynahum 150 musallahan sallamu anfusahum wa-aslihatahum lil-jihat al-mukhtassa (510 persons from the city al-Sanamayn assessed their situation, including 150 armed persons who surrendered and handed in weapons to relevant agencies), 25 December 2016, [url](#)

rebels.²⁵⁶ As of May 2019, armed rebels without heavy weapons were still in control of parts of the city²⁵⁷, and there have been clashes, though these conflicts have been resolved very quickly.²⁵⁸

In May 2019, several sources reported that the Syrian government had besieged parts of the city after government forces had allegedly been fired on by unknown gunmen.²⁵⁹ The cause of the clashes was reportedly because a security branch belonging to the GoS had arrested a former leader of an opposition faction in the city.²⁶⁰

Speculations diverged as regards why this conflict has escalated. Those opposed to reconciliation agreements claimed it is the GoS' strategy to gain full control of the city, while another source claimed that the security branch is trying to put an end to ordinary crime, and that it is not politically motivated.²⁶¹ Another source reported that the events were in relation to the higher level of conflict in Daraa governorate in general, where a number of GoS security force members and individuals who have entered into reconciliation agreement have been killed.²⁶²

The siege was lifted after eight days, when a delegation of local dignitaries and Russian military personnel visited the city to negotiate with the GoS.²⁶³

3.2.2 Daraa city

Daraa city is where the first protests against the GoS broke out in spring 2011, and different rebel factions controlled parts of the city for many years. Daraa city and the rest of the governorate stand out from other parts of Syria in that jihadist factions such as HTS and Ahrar al-Sham have enjoyed little support. One of the reasons was the city's proximity to Jordan, where the Military Operations Center run by US and Jordanian forces²⁶⁴ actively promoted more moderate groups at the expense of Islamist groups.²⁶⁵

Already in 2017, Daraa was included in a plan drawn up by Russia, Turkey and Iran that established several de-escalation zones.²⁶⁶ In June 2018, however, GoS launched a major offensive on Daraa²⁶⁷, after the last areas in Damascus and Eastern Ghouta outside GoS control had been recaptured.²⁶⁸ As a result of the offensive, GoS took control of all the areas in the southern part of the country, except an area in the desert near the Jordanian border, across the border from the US Tanf base. An IS pocket between this area and al-Suwayda was captured by GoS forces in mid-November 2018.²⁶⁹

Russia played a central part in the negotiations on the different reconciliation agreements, which formed the basis for GoS recapturing Daraa. Although Daraa had seen a lower level of conflict than the rest of the country²⁷⁰, around 15 000 people chose to leave the province and go to Idlib. Five

²⁵⁶ Al Tamimi, A. J., Reconciliations: The case of al-Sanamayn in North-Deraa, 27 April 2017, [url](#)

²⁵⁷ Landinfo has not found any sources indicating that the situation has changed. NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

²⁵⁸ Syrian Observer (The), Sanamayn City under siege, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁹ SOHR, Public tension and discontent continue in al-Sanamayn City as the suffocating siege by regime forces on the citizens continues for the 5th consecutive day, 20 May 2019, [url](#); Syrian Observer (The), Sanamayn City under siege, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁰ SOHR, Public tension and discontent continue in al-Sanamayn City as the suffocating siege by regime forces on the citizens continues for the 5th consecutive day, 20 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁶¹ Syrian Observer (The), Sanamayn City under siege, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁶² AFP, Cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south, Al Monitor, 29 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁶³ SOHR, After 8 days of tight siege... the regime forces lift the siege imposed over al-Sanamayn city after meeting with dignitaries from Hauran with the Russian forces, 23 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁴ Sayigh, Y., The Syrian regime has several military options as it advances after the Aleppo victory, Carnegie Middle East Center, 19 December 2016, [url](#)

²⁶⁵ Al-Koshak, O., Mapping Southern Syria's armed opposition, 13 October 2015, [url](#)

²⁶⁶ Beals, E., De-Escalation and Astana, Atlantic Council, 15 September 2017, [url](#)

²⁶⁷ OHCHR, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁶⁸ HRW (Human Rights Watch), Syria: Detention, harassment in retake areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁹ Liveuamap, Syria, 18 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁷⁰ FT, Assad forces retake Syrian rebel stronghold of Daraa, 12 July 2018, [url](#)

thousand of them were said to have been armed rebels, while the rest were family members of anti-government activists.²⁷¹

3.2.2.1 Consequences for the population

Daraa is one of the places in Syria where Russia has had the strongest influence on the reconciliation agreement, and among the places where many former rebels chose to stay, unlike in other parts of Syria.²⁷² Notably, many subsequently joined the 5th Corps²⁷³ (see also section 2.7.1.1), although several hundred former rebels who underwent a reconciliation process also joined the 4th Armoured Division. This was reportedly a reaction to Russia dissolving the 5th Corps in the western part of the governorate.²⁷⁴

Many places in both the city and governorate were still under the control of former rebels, but as part of the GoS power structure through the Russian supervised 5th Corps.²⁷⁵ As a consequence of the reconciliation agreements, regular Syrian forces and the police were not allowed to enter areas that were controlled by armed rebel groups.²⁷⁶

For many years, the number of political assassinations in Daraa was reported to be far higher than in other parts of the country.²⁷⁷

As of October 2019, this assassination trend was continuing and appeared to have escalated²⁷⁸, also since GoS regained control of the city and province in summer 2018. The reasons for the assassination trend were reportedly complex; not all of them were politically motivated but some also appear to be due to personal vengeance. Very few of these incidents resulted in penal sanctions by the state, giving the appearance for the civilian population that the city and governorate were only loosely controlled by GoS.²⁷⁹

Another result of the situation described above was that on several occasion armed clashes have broken out between different branches of the army and groups that were all part of GoS.²⁸⁰

OHCHR reported that civilians and former opposition fighters who signed reconciliation agreements with GoS and who took up positions in local administration or military forces, have been killed by unknown perpetrators in what appeared to be targeted killings.²⁸¹

Several sources reported arrest campaigns, including of individuals who signed reconciliation agreements with GoS.²⁸² Many of these campaigns were mainly focused on persons wanted for draft evasion. After signing a reconciliation agreement, draft evaders will usually be granted a grace period of six months before having to enlist (see section 2.7). One of the reasons for the arrests may be disagreement about when this grace period starts and ends, and about which terms of the

²⁷¹ Al Jabassini, A., From rebel rule to a post-capitulation era in Daraa southern Syria: The impacts and outcomes of rebel behaviour during negotiations, 2019, [url](#), p. 11

²⁷² AFP (Agence France Presse), Cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south, Al Monitor, 29 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁷³ Al Jabassini, A., From rebel rule to a post-capitulation era in Daraa southern Syria: The impacts and outcomes of rebel behaviour during negotiations, 2019, [url](#), pp. 12-14

²⁷⁴ Al Jabassini, A., From rebel rule to a post-capitulation era in Daraa southern Syria: The impacts and outcomes of rebel behaviour during negotiations, 2019, [url](#), p. 14

²⁷⁵ Hall, N., The aftershocks of reconciliation in Syria: Reflections on the past year, 17 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁶ Makki, D., As violence flares up in Daraa, control can be an illusion, Middle East Institute, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁷ Haid, H., The war of assassinations in Syria, 18 March 2016, [url](#); AFP, Cradle of Syria's uprising turns into 'chaotic' south, Al Monitor, 29 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁸ Abu Al Khair, Activists report a surge in assassinations in Daraa, 24 October 2019, [url](#)

²⁷⁹ Makki, D., As violence flares up in Daraa, control can be an illusion, Middle East Institute, 3 July 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁰ Syrian Observer (The), Fifth Corps attacks Assad intelligence in Daraa, 2 April 2019, [url](#)

²⁸¹ OHCHR, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 9-10

²⁸² Middle East Monitor, Syrians protest in Daraa over military conscription, 31 January 2019, [url](#); Euronews, Syrians detained, killed in southern cradle of revolt – UN, 21 May 2019, [url](#); Al Jumhuriya, "Reconciling" with the regime: A deadly game, 5 February 2019, [url](#)

reconciliation agreements must be implemented before the person concerned has to agree to be enlisted.²⁸³

OHCHR confirmed 380 incidents between 26 July 2018 and 31 March 2019 in which civilians in Daraa governorate were arrested and detained by GoS security forces either from their homes or at checkpoints. In another 150 incidents documented by OHCHR, arrested persons were released after few days in detention. The reasons behind the arrests were unclear, with some reportedly due to 'suspicion of terrorism'.²⁸⁴

Others were also arrested, such as media-activists and humanitarian workers. According to Human Rights Watch, most of these arrested individuals were arrested were not charged.²⁸⁵

The Col reported that in Daraa governorate services and utilities, including electricity, water and gas, were not available for most residents.²⁸⁶

²⁸³ Middle East Monitor, Syrians protest in Daraa over military conscription, 31 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁴ OHCHR, The "unreconciled" concerns of civilians in Dar'a Governorate, May 2019, [url](#), p. 8

²⁸⁵ HRW (Human Rights Watch), Syria: Detention, harassment in retake areas, 21 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁸⁶ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic [A/HRC/42/51], 15 August 2019, [url](#), p. 13

4. Recaptured areas

The SAA and allied forces have recaptured some parts of the country, and the agreements that finally ended the fighting must be regarded as outright surrender agreements.²⁸⁷ The manner in which these deals are implemented on the individual level is ‘highly underreported’.²⁸⁸

4.1 Aleppo

Aleppo was a divided city from 2012, when the eastern part of the city came under opposition control.²⁸⁹ This area was, in turn, connected to other rebel-held parts of the province surrounding the city, extending all the way to the Turkish border.²⁹⁰ The district of Sheikh Maqsood, a part of Aleppo, was controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) party, in agreement with GoS, but was handed back to GoS in February 2018 as Turkey attacked the Afrin-region.²⁹¹

In 2016, GoS intensified its siege of the rebel-held neighbourhoods, and in July 2016, it was estimated that around 275 000 people lived in the besieged parts of the city.²⁹² In December that year, talks were initiated between Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist jihadist rebel group, and a Russian negotiator. This resulted in an agreement whereby all rebels and their families were evacuated from the city, together with the vast majority of the remaining civilians, about 37 000 people.²⁹³

The head of the Russian Reconciliation Centre for Syria, headquartered at the Hmeimim Air Base outside Tartus, told the Russian news agency Sputnik in June 2017 that more than 3 000 Aleppo rebels had been pardoned since August 2016. They were said to be among the 6 000 rebels identified by the centre.²⁹⁴ It is not clear what this pardoning entails, however, or how it occurred.

When the fighting stopped in December 2016, massive destruction had affected the eastern parts of the city, and almost no civilians remained in these areas after the evacuations. As of an August 2019 article, almost three years later, the rebuilding of the city had not yet started, and the original population was spread around the other parts of the city and the rest of the country.²⁹⁵ Some small parts of the old historic centre have been reconstructed, but these are not residential areas. In other places, individual have repaired their homes or businesses to the best of their abilities, and some cafés have opened, but no organised reconstruction project has been initiated.²⁹⁶

According to August 2019 reporting, Aleppo is so close to the rebel-held areas that the western parts of the city are regularly subjected to missile attacks. In addition, the airport has been restored but is not open for regular flights.²⁹⁷

²⁸⁷ Hinnebusch, R., and Imady, O., Syria’s reconciliation agreements, Centre for Syrian Studies. University of St. Andrews, 12 February 2017, [url](#), p. 1; NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

²⁸⁸ Haid, H., The details of ‘reconciliation deals’ expose how they are anything but, Chatham House, August 2018, [url](#)

²⁸⁹ Al, ‘We Leave or We Die’: Forced Displacement under Syria’s ‘Reconciliation’ Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 34

²⁹⁰ Liveuamap, Syria, 15 November 2015, [url](#)

²⁹¹ Reuters, Kurdish YPG militia urges Syrian army to help it stop Turkey, 22 February 2018, [url](#)

²⁹² BBC, What’s happening in Aleppo?, 23 December 2016, [url](#)

²⁹³ Al, ‘We Leave or We Die’: Forced Displacement under Syria’s ‘Reconciliation’ Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 8

²⁹⁴ Sputnik, 6,000 militants identified in Aleppo with Russian reconciliation center’s help, 14 June 2017, [url](#)

²⁹⁵ AP, Syria’s Aleppo symbol of Assad’s wins and of enduring war, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁶ New Humanitarian (The), In Syria’s Aleppo, a slow rebuild begins, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁷ AP, Syria’s Aleppo symbol of Assad’s wins and of enduring war, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

4.2 Homs

In the city of Homs, Baba Amr district was especially destroyed in the war.²⁹⁸ The armed opposition enjoyed strong support in both Baba Amr²⁹⁹ and al-Waer districts, and while Baba Amr was recaptured in 2012, al-Waer was outside government control for prolonged periods. Like other areas, both al-Waer and Baba Amr were besieged by GoS for extensive periods.³⁰⁰

4.2.1 Al-Waer

The area first came under siege back in October 2013, at which time it was home to 70 - 100 000 people.³⁰¹ After the Baba Amr district was captured by GoS in spring 2014, al-Waer was the last part of Homs under rebel control. As a result, many rebels from other areas sought refuge in al-Waer, and an opposition source claims that, already in 2012, the population had reached 350 000.³⁰²

Negotiations on an agreement for al-Waer started already in mid-2014, and a number of ceasefires were agreed in 2015 and 2016. The first round of evacuations took place in 2016³⁰³, but they only included a small number of rebels and their families, who were evacuated to an area in the northern part of Homs province.³⁰⁴

In February 2017, the Syrian army launched a new offensive on the area, and a month later, local representatives of the rebels met with Russian officers to try to broker a deal. As a result of the agreement that was signed³⁰⁵, more than 20 000 civilians were evacuated from the area between March and May 2017³⁰⁶ to Idlib province and Jarabulus in the northern part of Aleppo province.³⁰⁷ The evacuees reportedly included around 3 700 armed rebels.³⁰⁸

4.2.1.1 Consequences for the population

Some of the inhabitants chose to remain in the district. According to the governor of Homs governorate, 1 150 rebels chose to stay put and surrendered their weapons as part of a GoS amnesty initiative.³⁰⁹ Landinfo assumes that draft evaders will have to complete their military service at some point (see section 2.5).³¹⁰

A group of around 600 people among those who were evacuated to the Jarabulus area chose to return to Homs shortly afterwards, due to the very difficult situation in the camps they were placed in. Local rebels allegedly tried to stop them, but they were eventually allowed to leave.³¹¹

In November 2017, a source estimated the population of al-Waer to around 45 000.³¹² In October 2018, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) stated that 1 400 schools had opened in Homs (including al-Waer), and that the organisation has trained more than 4 000 teachers in Homs alone.³¹³

²⁹⁸ Reuters, Former Syrian rebels flee, hide from army conscription, 10 August 2017, [url](#)

²⁹⁹ Lund, A., What would the fall of Homs mean?, Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 April 2014, [url](#)

³⁰⁰ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 48

³⁰¹ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 9

³⁰² SNHR, Al Wa'er neighbourhood residents join 12 million forcibly displaced Syrians. SNHR, 18 April 2017, at [url](#)

³⁰³ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 9

³⁰⁴ Reuters, Syrian rebels evacuated from opposition-held district in Homs, witnesses say, 22 September 2016, [url](#)

³⁰⁵ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 48

³⁰⁶ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 9

³⁰⁷ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 9; Anadolu Agency, 19 April 2017, Over 2,100 people leave Syria's al-Waer for Jarabulus, [url](#)

³⁰⁸ Reuters, Syrian rebels leave last opposition district in Homs, 21 May 2017, [url](#)

³⁰⁹ Reuters, Syrian rebels leave last opposition district in Homs, 21 May 2017, [url](#)

³¹⁰ NO-Landinfo drafter assessment

³¹¹ Al, 'We Leave or We Die': Forced Displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements, 2017, [url](#), p. 58

³¹² Irish Times (The), Stories from Syria: One family's defiant stand in al-Waer, 6 November 2017, [url](#)

³¹³ UNICEF, Children return to school in Homs, Syria supported by UNICEF, 22 October 2018, [url](#)

4.2.2 Baba Amr

This district in the old centre of Homs became a symbol of the uprising in Syria at an early stage, and it was one of the first districts to be seized by rebels in autumn 2011.³¹⁴ The population before the uprising was around 80 000.³¹⁵ It is also one of the places in Syria experiencing the greatest destruction. GoS regained control of the area through an agreement stating that the rebels would withdraw to other rebel-held areas nearby; not as a result of a reconciliation agreement.³¹⁶ By then, the area had been besieged by GoS and subjected to massive bombardment from February to 1 March 2012, when the army moved in and took control of the area.³¹⁷

4.2.2.1 Consequences for the population

The district was reported to be in ruins³¹⁸ and it is assumed that it will be rebuilt in accordance with the much discussed Law 10, which allows local authorities to enter into partnerships with private companies to reconstruct destroyed areas that were not originally zoned for residential purposes.³¹⁹

Despite the massive scale of destruction, some people have returned to the district. In 2016, UNHCR estimated that 3 000 people had returned, in addition to 200 internally displaced families from other parts of the country.³²⁰ Another source stated that 450 families had returned to the district by the end of 2017.³²¹

³¹⁴ Lund, A., What would the fall of Homs mean?, 24 April 2014, [url](#)

³¹⁵ UNHCR, Returnees and displaced in the neighbourhood of Baba Amr, Homs, 25 July 2016, [url](#)

³¹⁶ Reuters, Syrian city's rebel district still in ruins years after Assad victory, 18 August 2017, [url](#)

³¹⁷ Guardian (The), Battle for Baba Amr – timeline, 1 March 2012, [url](#)

³¹⁸ Al Souria Net, Al-nidham yuqarru al-mukhattat al-tandhimi li-Baba Amru wa-yanhi hilm sukanihi bil-awda ilayha (Regime decides operational plan for Baba Amru, ending inhabitants dream of returning), 6 September 2015, [url](#)

³¹⁹ SLJ, The new urban renewal law in Syria. Syrian Law Journal, 14 May 2018, [url](#)

³²⁰ UNHCR, Returnees and displaced in the neighbourhood of Baba Amr, Homs, 25 July 2016, [url](#)

³²¹ Hogan, C., In a war-weary Syrian city, a wedding celebration, National Geographic, 16 February 2018, [url](#)

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Terms of Reference

- How does the government treat the civilian population in reconquered areas?
- Which groups of individuals are called for military service?
- Which groups are targeted for arrest/violence?
- Are IDPs able to return to their hometowns after government reconquest?
- How are the IDPs treated upon return?



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