

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1330
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity
Titel:	"Reconciliation agreement" in Daraa: Insecurity, continued repression and collective punishment
Udgivet:	10. juli 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	25. august 2020

“Reconciliation agreement” in Daraa: Insecurity, continued repression and collective punishment



10/07/2020

Introduction

“Reconciliation agreements” have been used by the Syrian regime as a tool of establishing control over areas formerly held by opposition forces following brutal sieges and devastating campaigns of force often directed against the civilian population. The former head of the Syrian People’s Assembly, Hadiya Abbas, described the reconciliation agreements being offered by Assad’s regime (and backed up by security guarantees from Russia) as a method of bringing former opposition-held areas back under its control as a “means to consolidate the military victories of the Syrian regime’s army”.^[1] Such agreements represent one of the Syrian regime’s methods of “pacifying” the rebellious regions after starving them by siege and putting great pressure on their residents through heavy shelling and/or relentless military attacks accompanied by threatening messages by mediators. Locals usually sought to start a negotiating process of surrender, which would lead to a reconciliation agreement.

Following Russia’s intervention in Syria, the regime conquered various areas in Damascus and the surrounding countryside and offered reconciliation agreements with the

encouragement of the Russian military. The agreements were developed as a strategy in which locals, usually former members of Armed Opposition Groups (AOG), were supposed to be ensuring security in the medium term, but in the short term Moscow aimed to restore full control by the regime's army by integrating the rebel battalions of interest under its command.

The individuals required to undergo the surrender process would usually be instructed to sign a number of documents with personal data, contact details, career history, political orientation, criminal record and travels abroad, as well as relatives active against the regime.

In addition, they have to answer questions about the individual's role in any anti-regime activities, including demonstrations and armed opposition, give information about AOGs groups in their areas, secret tunnels, and foreign members or governments supporting AOGs (names, affiliations, roles and locations). Lastly, the applicants have to sign statement pledging not to carry out any action against the state and its security forces and militias forces through the use of demonstrations, social media, anti-regime publications and media platforms, or AOGs.[2]

In Daraa, this was done with the largest armed groups of Daraa, Ahmad Al-Awda's group which Russia integrated into the "Fifth Core". In the northern Homs countryside, the Manhal al-Saluh group was integrated into the same legion. The impact of these agreements on different regions varied greatly, but none has been restored to anything resembling their pre-war status. Illustratively, most of the people from the Damascus countryside who signed a reconciliation agreement still left their homes, some of the revolutionaries and civilians from the northern Homs countryside who signed the agreement stayed, and most of those in Daraa remained. One thing in common to all these areas: they continue to be plagued by insecurity and repression.

Considering the efforts by the regime and Russia to promote reconciliation agreements as a model that could be applied more generally to the return of displaced Syrians, the Syrian Association for Citizen Dignity (SACD) will publish a series of analytical papers that examine the impact of these agreements on the regions that negotiated them. These papers will attempt to identify the key effects and developments that took place in these areas after the agreements were signed, how they impacted the people who decided to reconcile and their plausibility as a model for return. The first such briefing looks at the reconciliation agreement in Daraa, its impact and the current situation.

Daraa: The rebellious city

Daraa governorate is relatively rich in natural resources, with vast agricultural areas and the Yarmouk Basin rich in water, which has traditionally facilitated relatively strong economic activity. The area has also benefited from regular remittances from a large number of

workers living abroad, especially in the Gulf countries (approximately 200,000 or 16 per cent of the province's inhabitants).[3] These monthly transfers provided a strong financial injection, and local people also made an effort to diversify the economy through transportation and trade.

Before 2011, under Baath Party rule, Daraa could be categorized as a marginalized governorate. There was a noticeable military presence in the streets of its towns and cities, under the pretext of the country's confrontation with Israel and the need to "protect the residents" of the region. Although its youth were generally better educated than those in other border governorates, and it had a strong platform for economic prosperity, it was targeted for marginalization. For instance, the government issued several laws that prevent major investments in what is known as the Security Approval Law, under the pretext of concerns about a possible attack from Israel. This marginalization caused an undercurrent of resentment and discontent with the regime among the population.

At the end of February 2011, some students wrote slogans denouncing the Assad regime on the walls of their school, inspired by the Arab Spring events in the region. One of the branches of security apparatus headed by Bashar Al-Assad cousin, Mr. Atef Najib, rushed to arrest them. The students were tortured and their nails pulled out; their families were threatened with arrest when they tried to find out about their whereabouts. The protests spread to other schools and sparked widespread peaceful protests that spilled over to other governorates. The peaceful demonstrations continued in Daraa and across Syria over the next several months. The regime responded by killing protesters. The repression and mass arrests continued, and the situation evolved into clashes that intensified with increasing numbers of soldiers from the regime army defecting to the side of revolutionaries. The regime was eventually driven out of the entire region, and the conflict turned into bombing and huge battles, ultimately ending with Russian involvement. The overwhelming force exerted on the opposition factions forced them to sign a reconciliation agreement in mid-2018, with Russia as a guarantor.

With the beginning of the popular uprising in March 2011 the regime reduced its services to the governorate as a means of collective punishment for the anti-regime sentiment. Family and clan solidarity, in addition to agriculture, were the means of survival and resistance, with people pooling resources and sharing to provide for the basic daily needs of most households. More than 100 civil organizations worked during the opposition's control period, helping to provide public services.[4] This is how the people were surviving before the reconciliation agreement, which on paper was supposed to provide a return to normalcy.

Reconciliation agreement in Daraa and its collapse

The reconciliation agreement in Daraa resulted from negotiating rounds between the notables and opposition factions from Daraa, the most prominent of which is the group

called "Sunni Youth" led by General Ahmed Al-Awda, and the Assad regime represented by the Military Operations Room in the south and the presence of generals from the Russian Hmeimim base. Most of the AOG members remained in the region; a few dozen rejected the agreement and fled north.

Under the agreement, Russia pledged to ensure that all necessary services are provided to the region, including the return of students and employees to universities and state institutions. However, neither services nor jobs returned, and the living situation worsened with the exit of humanitarian institutions that were operating in opposition regions; residents were dependent on the resources of those interested in supporting these areas.

After the reconciliation agreement was signed in mid-2018, thousands of residents who were displaced as a result of the bombardment returned to their homes. They had a sense of improving safety as the open military conflict ceased and because most of the people in the region remained in the area.[5] But the living situation was bad, and did not improve despite the promises to provide more services.

The situation was made worse by the presence of regime and Iranian militias, and the establishment of checkpoints that the regime put up and used to arrest the youth and shoot at those who do not stop and extort money from civilians. These checkpoints also restricted the free movement of trade between cities and towns.

In March 2019 the situation escalated, and the people demonstrated against the local authorities' attempt to erect a statue of Hafez al-Assad while ignoring the provision of key services to them. The regime responded by driving more of the youth into forced recruitment, and civilians and ex-AOG members began attacking military checkpoints at night in simulation of the early days of the military confrontation between the regime and defected soldiers and civilians who decided to defend themselves.

By the beginning of 2020, the regime had tried to storm several cities and towns in Daraa, and the situation escalated after the rebels seized soldiers who entered the town of Nahata for inspection and ignited a wave of daily fighting that ended with a new negotiation[6] and the expulsion of a number of young people towards the north of Syria. But the arrests, assassinations and forced recruitment of youth to fight in the Idlib and Aleppo countryside frontlines increased. Since April 2020, Assad's forces have amassed on the outskirts of various cities and towns in the south and issued daily threats to storm them.

Living in Daraa: A collective punishment

Once the agreement was signed, the regime cut services from the governorate instead of increasing them as promised. The Ministry of Higher Education fired more than 200 teachers at the end of 2018[7], and removed more than a third of the governorate's attorneys from the bar association[8]. Dozens of others were fired from various institutions, which deprived a number of families of their income. In addition, the Ministry of Education

rejected a third of the registered university students on the basis that they did not attend the university during the conflict[9].

The military barriers and checkpoints that were imposed near the villages contributed to obstructing commerce, which increased the price of goods, on top of the additional taxes now imposed on the area. Although Daraa boasts a large agricultural area, the people were unable to harvest approximately half of the crops due to the high prices of production inputs. Animal production decreased due to the constant bombing during the conflict, in addition to the decline in the available water in the Yarmouk Basin with the destruction of most of the infrastructure required to irrigate agricultural lands. For example, Lake Mezireb, formerly one of the largest water bodies in the region, dried up at the end of 2018[10]. In May 2020, aid in the form of agricultural seeds arrived for 1,500 families, while most families and regions were barred from accessing the seeds in the necessary quantities despite paying for them.[11]

Flour was rationed more strictly in Daraa than in any other region. The Baath Party representatives who controlled the region also used their power to distribute fuel and other resources to marginalize opponents and punish those who did not support the regime during the war.[12]

Before the war, many in Daraa relied on transport and commercial services between Syria and Jordan for their livelihoods. Yet trade with Jordan collapsed after the start of the protests in early 2011. Although the Nassib crossing reopened after the reconciliation agreement, the regime's arrest of a number of Jordanians who entered there continue to paralyze commercial activity in the area.[13]

After the reconciliation agreement, the people of Daraa, especially those who recently returned, began to revitalize their previous work, such as agricultural work and transportation. The residents seemed to cooperate more with each other to overcome the deficiencies and bridge the gaps that arose from the decline in the role of government institutions. The region held meetings to organize business and cooperation to exchange agricultural experiences, as merchants organized long sessions to reopen some markets and carried out necessary restoration work on buildings, streets, and infrastructure. In the early months of the reconciliation, Daraa established a governance model that relies on cooperation and coordination between people with whom they share close ties and a common threat. But this model was not satisfactory to the regime and other parties that are trying to interfere in the region[14], so the regime charged and detained a number of prominent community leaders in the region on the pretext of their affiliation with the opposition. Some of the detainees were brought to the terrorism court, where more than 200 people have been referred since the signing of the agreement; some have been sentenced to death.

Security situation: Descent into mayhem

The Syrian regime's practice of relentless arrests and the mass forced recruitment of men aged 25–40 significantly aggravated the situation in the region. While some were released, others were disappeared in prisons; some were reportedly assassinated. The forced recruits from Daraa were far more likely to die at the front than other recruits in regime's army, as they were pushed to the fiercest front lines against battle-hardened opponents. There were also reports that they were executed[15].

In February 2019, during the military operation against the villages of Idlib and the western countryside of Aleppo, a number of Daraa sons were forcibly recruited, including Ahmed Al-Ibrahim from the town of Ghabagheb, Mohammed Al-Aloush from Sanamen, Hani Al-Dandan from Al-Hara, Ibrahim Al-Jibawi from Jassem, Muhammad Husam Al-Khubei from Nawa and dozens of others. These forced conscriptions prompted daily demonstrations at the time of day they normally took place.

Detentions increased with the passage of people through the military checkpoints deployed near cities and towns. For example, in early May 2020, regime forces arrested Mahmoud Majeed al-Rahil with another young man at a security checkpoint near the city of Inkhil; his body was delivered on 8 May 2020 to his relatives from the military hospital in Damascus[16]. There are many such examples. The regime forces delivered the bodies of the brothers Hosam, Haitham and Ahmed Abu Halawa from the town of Ibta in Reeq Daraa in mid-March 2019, after their arrest days after the reconciliation agreement. The bodies of Maher Suleiman Al-Dali, Ahmad Ali Al-Awad and several others were delivered in February 2020. They previously defected from the regime's army in the town of Ghabagheb, but crossed back after the reconciliation agreement, trusting Assad's amnesty order, which was supposed to include defectors from his army.

Another important element complicating the security situation in Daraa is the presence of the forces of Iran and Hezbollah, who have also sought to maintain a presence in the region at any cost in order to stay near the border with Israel and to take advantage of the road to Jordan to smuggle cannabis and drugs into the Arab Gulf states[17]. Iran has officially dispatched an officer to negotiate with the people[18] who visited the Hajj Al-Sagheer region in March 2020. This officer met local residents in the presence of leaders of Hezbollah and the Iraqi militia present in the area to encourage their children to join their militias in exchange for protection. At the same time, Russia wanted to recruit as many people as possible to the Fifth Corps to reinforce its vision of restoring the regime's army and forming local protection units. Sometimes they did this by coercion and other times by offering attractive sums of money. Some agents affiliated with the regime met with local youth to convince them to join the security branches or auxiliary forces, claiming this would contribute to the stability of the region as security would be in the hands of people from Daraa, and not outsiders such as Iranian militias and Hezbollah.

Daraa has turned into an arena for settling accounts between the different actors that tried to assert their control over it. In the resulting mayhem, the region has witnessed more than

335 assassinations[19] between the signing of the reconciliation agreement and March 2020. Armed clashes have intensified in the region, while the people took to the streets to protest the living conditions, detention and forced recruitment. In early 2020 the security situation took a dangerous turn; the regime used new security and military tactics in an effort to end the protests and resistance. It appointed a new security official in the governorate, which greatly increased the frequency of threats[20]. He set out to arrest 1,000 wanted youth from Daraa[21] and started handing over the bodies of some of the detainees. On 2 February, he handed over the body of the young Radwan Sorour, and she had torture marks. On 11 February, he delivered the body of the engineer Ratib Othman al-Jabawi, a prominent resident of Jassim. He threatened annihilation by Jihad Barakat, the leader of Assad's guerrilla force militia.

Since early April 2020, more military reinforcements began to arrive in the region. These new forces expelled civilians from their homes on the outskirts of the Daraa Al-Balad suburb on 14 May and threatened violent bombing of various areas. These measures prompted a new round of negotiations[22], which are still ongoing in several areas in Daraa and by various parties including Iran and Russia, but without a new general agreement in sight.

Partial agreements were reached in some regions, which resulted in Russia securing an increase in the power of the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps and boosting the number of its members. The Syrian regime also presented a new "initiative," announced through loudspeakers in some mosques, promising pardons to everyone sought for military recruitment, provided they give themselves up and signing documents which would determine the time and place of their recruitment. Also, the regime security forces released 50 detainees, but it subsequently transpired that most of them were accused of robbery and other felonies, not as political prisoners or those arbitrarily arrested.

On the other hand, the demonstrations continued in the cities and towns of Daraa, demanding the improvement of living conditions, the overthrow of the regime, the expulsion of Iranian militias from the city, and the release of detainees. The demonstrations continue to be held against the backdrop of an increase in kidnappings and the continued raids and arrests in most parts of Daraa. Illustratively, the former head of the local opposition council, Eng. Nabil Suleiman Al-Asmi, was arrested on June 25, 2020, after his house in Dael was raided. At the same time, the regime appointed a new governor for the Daraa governorate from a military background, Major General Marwan Ibrahim Sharbak.

The resulting cycle of violence continues with attacks such as that from the 21st of June, when an improvised explosive device targeted a bus carrying Syrian regime soldiers, killing 15 and wounding 23. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Silent displacement: the impact of the failure of Daraa reconciliation agreement

Many displaced Syrians have followed the reconciliation model that took place in Daraa with great anticipation. Despite the prejudices of the agreement and its signing under pressure from threats, shelling and military attacks which forced it, some people held out hope for the promise of stability and the restoration of humanity that it promised to bring. But the different interests of the actors, especially Iran and Hezbollah on the one hand, and Russia on the other, in addition to the regime's rejection of any governance model that does not accept its complete control over the region, has returned the situation to square one. Security tensions and armed clashes have returned in full force, and daily assassinations, arrests, and threats of violence against civilians have re-emerged, causing a new, gradual displacement of the population.

The displacement continues towards the north of Syria through costly smuggling operations, in which the displaced may pass through the regime's checkpoints and be forced to pay large sums. Daraa residents are also fleeing to various regions under regime's control, perhaps the most prominent of which is Damascus governorate, which some of them resort to in order to find work to achieve a better standard of living.

The results of a field survey conducted by the information team at SACD in mid-2019, which included the Daraa region, showed that 69 per cent of men and 59 per cent of women do not feel safe due to arrests, chaos, and forced recruitment. The study also showed that 62 per cent of respondents confirmed that they or one of their relatives had been subjected to arbitrary arrest at the hands of the regime apparatus, and 44 per cent of those who had returned to Daraa governorate were attempting to leave again.

The residents who stayed in Daraa governorate after the reconciliation agreement were also forced to pay fees for government services that do not exist: 33 per cent of the respondents from Daraa governorate claimed they were forced to pay fees for electricity, water and telephone services prior to the date of the agreement, before they returned to the region.

For example, Abu Ali's family headed towards the Syrian north from Daraa Al-Balad in late 2019 on a two-day trip during which Abu Ali paid more than 4,000 USD[23]. Shortly after his arrival in the city of Idlib, it was bombed, which forced him to flee again to the city of Afrin, on the border with Turkey.

Some reports indicate that at least ten people were displaced from Daraa governorate every day during the first half of 2019. The SACD's sources confirm that the displacement outside the governorate continued until at least April 2019[24]. The situation deteriorated significantly in early 2020, as residents moved to other areas over fears of large incursions by regime's army.

Daraa is thus a region that witnessed relative calm after the reconciliation agreement, which led to the temporary return of a good portion of the local population. Yet it soon

turned into another major area of displacement, with people fleeing — this time probably for good.

I am afraid because of the repeated harassment, discrimination, and malicious acts of the regime's agents in the region, and I am constantly afraid of arbitrary detention or reporting. I was arrested and denied my job.

– Abu Jasim, 54, from Daraa

There is no safety; there are arrests of financial extortion and forced recruitment, there are no job opportunities, there is no freedom of movement between towns and cities, but there is humiliation and oppression.

– Saeed, 37, from Daraa

Conclusion

Despite the signing of the reconciliation agreement in mid-2018 with Russian sponsorship and guarantees, this agreement seemed fragile from the beginning. The regime and its allies did not fulfil their pledges from the agreement: they deliberately marginalized the city and its residents and deprived them of services as a form of collective punishment for a region that has been out of its control for many years and started a movement that extended to the rest of Syria. The security situation, arrests and liquidations at military checkpoints or prisons, in addition to the threat of intrusion and escalation, prompted thousands of citizens from Daraa governorate to leave. This in turn caused new unreported waves of displacement throughout 2019 and early 2020.

If this dire situation continues, it will result in more arrests, killings, liquidations, and revenge, which will force a large part of the governorate's population to leave. We therefore conclude that:

- The policy of threats and bombings that forced the people and AOGs to sign the reconciliation agreement in Daraa eventually led to a relative calm that was reflected in the return of a number of people to the area. However, it was quickly followed by the imposition of collective punishment, with the regime depriving the people of basic services. This directly impacted the people of Daraa and contributed to more poverty and destitution. The regime continuously attempts to exploit the reconciliation agreement to penetrate the villages and arrest more young men to force them to the frontlines, and to liquidate its former opponents. Many of these people were put in prison and liquidated by brutal methods, all of which undermined the advantages provided by the agreement and led to the silent displacement of a large portion of the population.
- The hidden conflicts between Russia, the regime, Iran, and the militias that follow them — against the background of influence, the economy, and revenge — ignited the region and

turned it into a chaotic daily arena of chaos, which led to a clear instability that quickly surfaced.

- The “reconciliation” model that was applied in the Syrian south with Russian guarantees failed to achieve the lowest level of stability or secure the minimum public services needed for living. It instead resulted in a new military escalation of the region that features almost daily liquidation and conflicts.
- This model and its effects confirm once again that the regime and its allies are unable to find a sustainable solution in Syria without a robust international presence that would guarantee people’s safety and wellbeing. On the contrary, they only succeeded in increasing the chaos and creating new waves of silent displacement from the areas of reconciliation.
- The Daraa experience illustrates the failure of the model of reconciliation agreements even as a measure of restoring some degree of stability in the areas taken by the regime, let alone as a model to be considered in any way as relevant in the context of organised, safe, voluntary and dignified return. The experience of Daraa clearly shows that this model cannot be successfully applied anywhere in Syria, especially in places with a significant number of returnees or displaced people, such as northern Syria.

[1] SANA News Agency, September 2016

[2] “The Details of ‘Reconciliation Deals’ Expose How They Are Anything But”, Haid Haid, August 2018, Chatham House <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-details-of-reconciliation-deals-expose-how-they-are-anything-but-a-closer-look-at-the-regimes-process-reveals-its-real-goal-retribution-and-control>

[3] Data from the Central Statistical Office in Syria, Office of the Prime Minister, 2010

[4] For more, review the organizations’ map of Citizens for Syria: <https://citizensforsyria.org/mapping-syrian-cs/simplesearch/>

[5] From an interview conducted by SACD with Abu Yasser, a resident of Busra Al-Sham, May 2020

[6] From an interview conducted by SACD with Mohammad, 25 years old from the town of Nahta, May 2020

[7] Syrians for Justice, <https://stj-sy.org/ar/1093/>

[8] President of the Bar in Daraa, One third of Daraa’s lawyers were disbarred, Enab Baladi, 22 July 2018 [in Arabic] <https://enabbaladi.net/archives/242248>

[9] Interview conducted by SACD with Mohammad Musalma, a university student from Daraa, April 2020

[10] Who is responsible for the drought of the Muzayreeb Lake?, Syria Stories, 21 February 2018 [in Arabic] <https://bit.ly/2Y6EWxi>

[11] One of the interviewees mentioned that the price of sowing rose several times before reaching Daraa, while the checkpoints prevented more than once the arrival of quantities of it.

[12] From interviews conducted by SACD with notables from Daraa, May 2020

[13] Jordan protests against the repeated arrest of its citizens in Syria and calls for their immediate release, CNN Arabic, 4 April 2019 [in Arabic] <https://cnn.it/3e32UOt>

[14] From an interview conducted by SACD with Abu Aref, a merchant in Daraa, May 2020

[15] Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear, SACD, July 2019 <https://medium.com/@SACD/reconciling-with-death-disappearance-and-fear-6e17fe2456aa>

[16] A body full of traces of torture ... Assad's forces hand over the body of a young man who was arrested a few days ago in Daraa countryside, Horan Free League, 7 May 2020 [in Arabic] <https://bit.ly/31UC20U>

[17] From interviews conducted by SACD with notables from Daraa, May 2020

[18] From interviews conducted by SACD with notables from Daraa, May 2020

[19] Assassinations in Daraa: Terrifying numbers and multiple killing mechanisms, Brocar Press, 29 March 2020 [in Arabic] <https://bit.ly/2MXkx7g>

[20] From interviews conducted by SACD with notables from Daraa

[21] From interviews conducted by SACD with notables from Daraa, May 2020

[22] From interviews conducted by SACD with Ahmad, one of Daraa notables

[23] From an interview conducted by SACD with Abu Ali

[24] Syria: Silent forced displacement of thousands of residents in Quneitra and Daraa, Syrians for Truth and Justice, 9 August 2019 [in Arabic] <https://bit.ly/3f76EQt>

<https://syacd.org/reconciliation-agreement-in-daraa-insecurity-continued-repression-and-collective-punishment/>