

# The Southern Battle of Syrian

## Field Developments and Actors' Positions

Situation Estimation  
**STUDIES UNIT**

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## Preface

June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 is considered the actual end date of the de-escalation deal in southern Syria. The deal brokered by Russia, Jordan and the United States was put to an end as the Syrian regime Air Force targeted opposition-controlled areas in Daraa countryside in conjunction with the regime forces opening fire on several fronts to advance on the ground in the region. Later on June 23, the Russian Air Force started its combat operations in the region.

Towards the end of May 2018, southern Syria started witnessing increasing tension along with regime threats that it will launch a military operation against the opposition factions in the region. During that time, the regime dropped leaflets on villages and towns in Daraa Province more than once, calling for reconciliation and for citizens to keep away from military actions.

In reality, all eyes turned towards the south with the regime fully recapturing the southern neighborhoods of the capital Damascus on May 21, 2018. With news about a possible military campaign in the south, local and international media outlets reported news of Iranian militias withdrawing from some their stations in the south. The news of Iranian withdrawal led to the belief that there is an agreement between the guarantor countries for the de-escalation in the south and Israel to spare the region an extensive war.

Soon the rumours turned into facts as an Israeli military delegation visited Russia on May 30. The delegation included the Minister of Defence, Avigdor Lieberman, and the Head of Military Intelligence, Major General Hayman. The delegation discussed the return of the Syrian regime to the Syrian-Israeli border, the reactivation of the cease-fire agreement of 1974, and the withdrawal of Iran from the border area with Israel and from all Syrian territory.

Iran's withdrawal from the south ahead of the Israeli-Russian meeting sent a clear message to regional countries that it was complying with the mounting pressure on it which coincided with the United States withdrawing from the nuclear deal. On June 02, 2018, Iran confirmed its field position by declaring that it supports Russia's efforts to impose regime control over southern Syria.

Iranian militias had previously rejected the idea of withdrawing from the south when Russia demanded that in late July, 2017. At that time, these

Iranian militias clashed with Republican Guard forces using light and medium weapons in the towns of Namer and Qarfa in the eastern countryside of Daraa Province.

The opposition factions mobilized their forces and capabilities and declared Tal al-Hara area a military zone on June 1, 2018. The move came in conjunction with the Syrian regime forces' arrival to the triangle of death area. Most of the opposition factions also made a show of their forces and military capabilities.

This report discusses the field and political developments of the battle of the south as well as showcasing international and local actors' positions and the expected scenarios of the battle.

## First: Field Developments and the Military Map

### Field Preparations

#### 1) The Syrian Opposition

A day after the outbreak of the battle for the south, opposition factions announced the formation of two operation rooms one for Daraa Province and the other for al-Quneitra Province on June 20, 2018. The Central Operations Room in Daraa included al-Bunyan al-Marsous Operation Room, Repel the Invaders Operation Room, Triangle of Death Operation Room, al-Nasr al-Mubin Operation Room and Repel the Aggressors Operations Room. The operation room in al-Quneitra was called "al-Nasr al-Mubin".

The Central Operations Room in the south completed its emergency organizational steps by announcing the formation of a unified media office responsible for managing the media affairs, covering the military confrontations and preventing other media networks from issuing any material related to the operations prior to consulting with this office.

The Central Operations Room also established the "Revolution Security Forces" on June 24, 2018 and identified its objectives as follows:

1. Preserve public and private property and prosecute whoever exploits the security situation and the rebels' preoccupation with fighting on the fronts.
2. Act quickly against saboteurs, bandits, crisis traders and warlords where their centers are dispersed in various parts of the south.

3. Clamp down on all those who promote rumors that cause chaos and panic among civilians.
4. Firmly and vigorously monitor whoever promotes reconciliations or takes action that may lead to reconciliation.
5. Form specialized military courts to prosecute and hold accountable any military commander or element proved to be in communication with the al-Assad gangs. Any communication from outside of the Central Operations Room is considered treason.
6. Hold accountable any factions that surrender or monopolize weapons and ammunition, confiscate all their weapons and place them at the disposal of the Central Operations Room and sending all their leaders to the military courts.

The Central Operations Room established a mechanism for the work of the Revolution Security Forces, considering them an emergency force that is on the alert 24/7 in all parts of the south. The sub-operation rooms are expected to support and back the forces' raiding operations. The Revolution Security Forces' officer determines the size of the force for each situation and the Revolution Security Forces assign a judicial body for its field courts as well as a Shariah Board for Fatwa.

By establishing the Revolution Security Forces, it appears the opposition factions are trying to avoid a security vacuum after they withdrew their elements from the cities towards the fronts. The move also is part of efforts to minimize the expected manifestations of chaos that might be exploited by the regime or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which operates in Yarmouk Basin.

## 2) The Syrian Regime

The regime began sending military reinforcements to the south the likes of which the south had not witnessed since July 2017, at the beginning of June 2018. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division's al-Ghaith Forces and the Republican Guard's military divisions, most notably Saraya al-Areen Brigade and the al-Quds Brigade were stationed in the towns of Habbariyah, Dair Mukar, Khan Arnaba and al-Amal Farms in the Triangle of Death area located in the northern countryside of al-Quneitra province. It appeared that the regime was preparing for a military operation along this axis within the battle of the south. The regime deployed Pantsir S-1 air defense system along the border with the Golan on June 12. The regime obtained the Russian Pantsir S-1 system in 2012.

The regime culminated its military reinforcement by dispatching of its Defence Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub to the southern region on June 15, 2018. In addition, Colonel Suhail al-Hasan, who commands a group of the Republican Guards called the Tiger Forces, arrived in Daraa on June 17. As part of the proactive preparations for the military operation, al-Hasan went to Khalkhalah Military Airport in Suwayda Province. He was accompanied by military reinforcements deployed all along the area between eastern Daraa and western Suwayda most notably, the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, the special forces and the 15<sup>th</sup> Division.

On June 19, in conjunction with the outbreak of the first battles in the eastern countryside, the regime closed the crossing between Suwayda and Daraa provinces in the town of Sama al-Hanidat with the exception of the Sami Road, which remained partially open but food items were not allowed to pass. The regime also reinforced the force deployed at the checkpoint east of the town of Sama and banned entry to and exit from the town.

Prior to the start of the battle in the south, the regime secured its eastern border by launching a battle against ISIS positions in the desert in the north-eastern Suwayda countryside. ISIS forces came to be stationed in this area following a deal with the regime for the forces to exit from positions in southern Damascus towards locations in the desert.

In short, the regime field preparations focused on several axes in the eastern countryside of Daraa, the Triangle of Death and the northern al-Quneitra region.

### **The Military Confrontations**

Direct military confrontations began in the eastern countryside of Daraa due to the Syrian regime's continuous military preparations in the western countryside. Confrontations started at the axis of the missile battalion near Masika town in Daraa's eastern countryside on June 19, 2018. The regime managed to control the axis for several hours before withdrawing. The regime's attempt to control the base aimed at securing the northern frontier of Basr al-Harir City, and cutting off the lines of communication between the opposition controlled areas of al-Lujat and Basr al-Harir.

The regime then expanded its operations focusing on Daraa countryside and opened three axes to advance; namely Basr al-Harir axis, West Daraa axis and Khirbet Ghazaleh- al-Naima axis. By advancing on these axes, the regime plans to divide the eastern Daraa countryside into three zones al-Lujat, al-Hirak and Daraa City.

The regime advance from Basr al-Harir includes multiple combat fronts; Harran, Sama al-Hunidat and al-Bustan. The regime seized control of the strategic town of Basr al-Harir and then of Maliha al-Atash on June 26, 2018 thereby isolating al-Lujat into a separate zone.

The regime forces managed to advance to Basr al-Harir after gaining control of nine villages in Basr al-Harir's eastern and eastern northern vicinity. It appears that the regime plan to isolate the al-Lujat area aimed at avoiding military intervention into the area and instead pressure the people in al-Lujat to surrender without fighting. Al-Lujat area is known for its geographically rocky terrain and tribal environment which makes it a stronghold for opposition factions and enables it to withstand the regime attacks for a longer period.

Concerning its forces advancement along the Khirbet al-Ghazaleh-al-Naima axis, the regime plans to bypass the eastern neighborhoods avoid direct clashes with the opposition factions in Daraa camp and try to force the factions to engage in open-air combat. This helps the regime separate Daraa al-Balad from its eastern countryside and prevent the arrival of military supplies to opposition fighters inside Daraa al-Balad.

The regime aims to open multiple fronts along this axis to connect al-Katiba al-Mahjoura to the Nasib crossing point. The regime needs to achieve these gains to control the western al-Gharya town, Naima, Saida and then Umm al-Mayathen to extend the scope of the front in the direction of the Nasib crossing. If the regime achieves its field objective along this axis, it will manage to completely isolate al-Hirak and the remaining villages in the eastern countryside.

The regime forces' advancement along the western Daraa axis is an attempt to reach al-Jumruk al-Qadim by advancing from the outskirts of Sijneh to al-Badou neighbourhood to the point of the Air Defense Battalion, thus isolating the city of Daraa from its western countryside. The advance will doubly threaten the city if it coincides with regime forces advancing along the Naima axis towards the Nasib crossing. If the regime forces achieve their objectives along the western Daraa and Naima axis, the regime will control the area of the military road extending from Tal Shihab to the Nasib crossing.

It is highly probable that the regime will open a fourth military axis towards the town of Busra al-Sham in order to occupy and disperse the opposition



forces and to slowly capture the areas in the eastern countryside after isolating them into three zones.

Tal al-Hara is an important strategic area in Daraa's western countryside, making it a regime target after the regime reinforced its military presence in the area before the launch of the battles in Daraa province's eastern countryside. Tal al-Hara is the highest hill in Daraa western northern countryside overseeing expansive parts of the countryside of Daraa and Quneitra. When the opposition factions controlled the hill, it enabled them to control Daraa and Quneitra countryside in October 2014. Also, controlling this area enables the installation of communication and reconnaissance points.

If the regime wants to control Tal al-Hara, it must begin its advance from its locations in Qaryet and Katibet Jadiye village and take control of Zamreen town and al-Hara city. It may also have to launch an attack on the town of Kafar Shams. The fall of al-Hara Hill to the regime forces signals the fall of the towns in the countryside of Daraa and Quneitra respectively. In the western countryside and Quneitra province battles, the regime may try to close down the Jubata al-Khashab pocket where opposition factions are based.

It must be mentioned that the Central Operations Room reached a deal with Jaish Khaled- which pledged allegiance to ISIS officially on June 3-on June 26, 2018. The deal includes a temporary cease fire in conjunction with the regime Russia-backed up military campaign on the area. The deal was reached through al-Islah Reform Commission in Houran following month-long negotiations.

When talking about the opposition factions' military plan in the face of the regime, it seems that the Central Operations Room is only an emergency formation that was born out of necessity. The distribution of the operations rooms across the southern area was ineffective because they could not cover all gaps that the regime and its allied militias might advance from. Preliminary reports regarding confrontations indicate that the Central Operations Room has not appropriately distributed tasks. It can be said that the emergency solutions the southern factions adopted are insufficient to confront the regime and its international allies especially in the absence of any initiatives to provide the factions with external support.

Opposition factions could have avoided this current field reality if they had formed a joint military command previously. The Central Operations

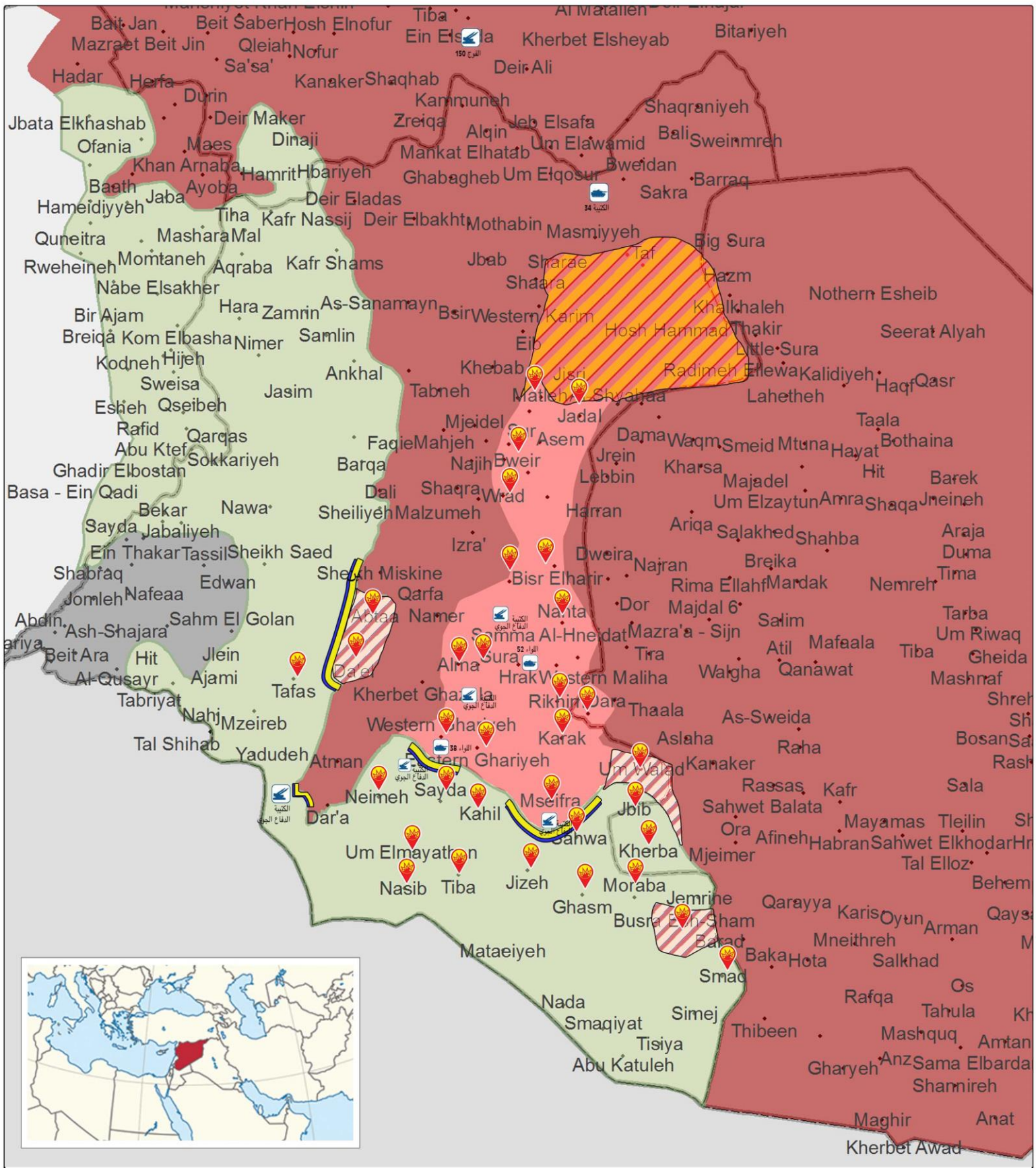
**Field Developments and Actors' Positions**

Room would have emanated from this command and it would have distributed tasks in a manner that would deprive the regime from the possibility of advancing, maneuvering with artillery and breaching gaps. The factions in the south could confront the regime forces as according to several estimates, the factions possess diverse weapons and equipment of the small, medium and heavy variety and the military staff have field battle and academic experience.

Beside weak coordination between the emergency operations room functioning under the Central Operations Room, it is hard to understand why the Central Operations Room did not open distraction fronts along multiple axis that are calm for the regime to decrease pressure on the combat axes in the eastern countryside.

# Map of military influence in Syria Southern Region

2018/07/02



ISIS	Opposition Armed Forces	Regime Forces	Clash Axis	Target areas
Reconciliation Zone	Conflict Zones	Regime Controlled Zones in June	Tanks Brigade	Military Airport
			Air Defense Battalion	Symbol keys

## Second: Positioning of Reconciliation Agreements in the Southern Battle

The Russian Reconciliation Center in Hmeimem initiated efforts aiming to mainstream the reconciliation system in the villages and towns in the south in February 2018. The Center's efforts came following the the reconciliation model being adopted by cities and towns in the vicinity of Damascus, northern Homs and other areas.

On February 22, a meeting was held in Daraa attended by the head of the Russian Reconciliation Center of the southern region, the Russian Admiral Collette Vadim, the Syrian Regime Reconciliation Committee member Awad al-Swaidan, and several representatives from the villages and towns of Dael, Ibta, al-Hirak, Nahteh, eastern and western al-Miliha, Tafas and Daraa al-Balad.

The regime press office quoted the Russian Admiral stressing, “the need to work for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the south and serious efforts to convince the armed terrorist groups to hand over their weapons and return to the homeland.” Admiral Vadim stressed that the regime's orientation after completing its military operations in Idlib and the Eastern Ghouta is the southern region, and that there is not much time left. The Admiral emphasized that efforts must be made to restore peace to the region to get rid of the scourge of war and preserve lives and infrastructure. During the meeting, a document including the agreement text was distributed to the attendees outlining that all parties must adhere to the ceasefire regime and the document was a sample of that to be signed by all parties.<sup>(1)</sup>

Based on the meeting, the most prominent local and military city councils in western Daraa countryside issued a statement at the end of March threatening the godfathers of the reconciliations living in the liberated areas. The statement spoke of taking all the deterrent executive steps against them without any consideration.<sup>(2)</sup>

Despite these threats, Russia sought to open channels of communication with the civilian forces via the reconciliation godfathers in the cities and towns of Daraa. Russia sent invitations to sit down and negotiate with the civilian forces. Consequently, a delegation of civil actors responded to

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<sup>1</sup> “Meeting between Russians and regime in Daraa: the south after Idlib and Ghouta,” 22/02/2018. <https://goo.gl/Dkw2KE>

<sup>2</sup> “Daraa factions and councils threaten the godfathers of reconciliations,” Enab Baladi, 31/03/2018, <https://goo.gl/dwbZih>

these invitations in April 2018 and a meeting was held including Russian Reconciliation Center officials, regime representatives and the civil actors who responded in Suayda Province. However, the civil opposition delegation left the meeting without reaching an agreement due to the manner of speech pursued by the Russian officer. The Russian officer's speech was characterized by threats of the south living the al-Gouta scenario and demands that the reconciliation process begin immediately before the beginning of the military option. In addition, the Russian side demanded that the armed factions in al-Hara city hand over their weapons, dissidents and those who are evading mandatory military service return to the fold, or an armed party, affiliated to the National Defense, whose leaders are from the city, is established in the city on the basis it will receive financial and military support from the regime.<sup>(3)</sup>

In a similar move, on May 16, 2018, Russia asked the Mahja Local Council, north of the city of Daraa, to form a military delegation to negotiate with it regarding the fate of the town which is besieged by the regime. On May 14, the same request was sent to the Najij Local Council, but the town quickly rejected the invitation.<sup>(4)</sup> On 25 May, Russia sent a new letter threatening the people and factions of the town of Abtaa and the city of Da'al in Daraa. The letter demanded that they hand over their areas and comply with the Russian terms, but the letter was categorically rejected by the factions and civil actors.<sup>(5)</sup> In early June, Sheikh Fadi al-Asami, a member of the Revolutionary Command Council in Daraa and one of the dignitaries of the province, denied that the leaders of the Houran Reform Commission and the Revolutionary Command Council agreed to meet with the Russian side.<sup>(6)</sup>

On 20 May 2018, helicopters dropped leaflets on the eastern countryside of Daraa, demanding civilians to enter into reconciliation agreements. The regime intensified the distribution of these leaflets, but soon a widescale assassinations of prominent members of the reconciliation committees<sup>(7)</sup> began though no side so far has announced its responsibility for these operations. However, it is most likely that the opposition factions are behind these operations since they warned those they refer to as the

<sup>3</sup>“Daraa factions declare Tal al-Hara a military zone”, Enab Baladi, 01/06/2018, <https://goo.gl/nTtdgN>

<sup>4</sup>“Mahja rejects negotiations with Russia”, Gerun Network, 16/05/2018, <https://goo.gl/Lnrx1G>

<sup>5</sup> Russia demands FSA hand over in Ibtai, Dael and Daraa al-Balad, Smart, 25/05/2018, <https://goo.gl/PHZQnn>

<sup>6</sup> Daraa: Hmeimem rushes reconciliations following failure of negotiations with the Americans, al-Modon, 13/06, 2018, <https://goo.gl/YYYYD3Q>

“Assassinations’ list in Daraa, killing of 6 members of reconciliations committee during June,” Enab Baladi, 14/6/2018, <https://goo.gl/P8R4FV>

godfathers of the reconciliations a few months. The factions also launched an arrest campaign against a number of prominent leaders on charges of communicating with the Russian side. The arrests included leaders of the Ansar al-Islam Front, the commander of the Fajr al-Tawhid Brigade and the general coordinator of the Syrian National Liberation Front Baraa al-Qbuaani known as Abu Mohammed al-Akhtabout. Al-Obuaani was released but is still under investigation. The Saif al-Sham Brigades dismissed Asim Subaihi their commander in Daraa Province and referred him for investigation on similar charges.

On 22 June 2018, the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that the towns of Dama, al-Shiah and part of the village of Jadal had moved into the control of the regime after the Omari Brigades leader joining the reconciliation regime following negotiations between his faction and representatives of the Russian Reconciliation Center and the Syrian regime. However, the opposition factions' Central Operations Room in Daraa immediately denied that the Syrian regime forces had made any advances and the allegations made by the Russian Ministry of Defence regarding the handing over of villages in al-Lujat area in eastern Daraa countryside. The Central Operations Room indicated that Omari Brigades leader Wajdi Abu Thalith had been dismissed from the faction a month before the announced after his treason was proven.

In conjunction with the start of the battle of the south, it is clear that the Russian forces are trying to resolve the Daraa eastern countryside dossier through the reconciliation regime more than rely on field achievements. Through this policy, the Russian forces were able to control many villages, the first was Ibttaa village which Syrian forces entered it without fighting on June 29. It was followed by Da'al in the western countryside, and a number of villages in the eastern countryside: al-Swra, Alma, Deir Sult, western Maliha, eastern Maliha, Zohm, Karak, western Gharia, eastern Gharia, Kaheel, al-Musafira, al-Hirak, Jabib, al-Sahwa and al-Mataiye on 30 June. The Central Operations Room then managed to launch an offensive in which they regained control of some of these villages; namely Kaheel, Jabib, al-Sahwa, and al-Mataiye.

On July 1, Russian forces managed to include the village of Busra al-Sham in the reconciliation regime after it conducted a side agreement with Shabab al-Sunneh forces. The agreement is not approved by the negotiating committee designated by the civil and armed opposition forces in southern Syria.

It appears that the reconciliations regime adopted by the Russians to gain control on the ground is mainly based on persuading and enlisting military and civilian forces that have had prior communication with the Russian forces. The Russian depend on making these actors more promises including promises of gains within the Syrian regime institutions. Russia is focused on the restructuring the opposition factions affiliated with the reconciliation regime within the Fifth Corps -Storming. This tactic is somewhat similar to the policy pursued by Russia in Chechnya.

### **Third: The Importance of the Battle for the Actors**

The southern battle is considered very important for local and international actors including the regime, the opposition, Russia, Iran, the United States, Israel and Jordan. In this section, we present a review of the importance of the battle for these various actors and the effect the battle has on their interests in the south.

#### **The Regime and its International Allies**

The success of the battle means the complete expansion of the regime's control to include all of the south and to limit the opposition's control to the northern region.

Succeeding in the battle will enable the regime to control the Nasib border crossing, secure the Damascus-Aleppo international road and control the al-Hjaz Railway which will enable the regime to open the international road with Jordan in a matter of time. The change will give the regime an important economic opportunity since international land transportation was restricted to the Lebanese borders during the past 7 years.

It is especially important for Russia to have full control of the south because it means that one of the two dossiers (the south and Idlib) suspending a political solution will be resolved. Russia then will be able to move more flexibly in proposing its political options.

According to the Russian vision, the course of the political solution includes ending the armed conflict, cleaning out the small territories controlled by the opposition factions and maintaining a cohesive state. This vision includes the symbolism of restoring state institutions throughout the Syrian territory and applying the political solution through the constitution.

Russia has increasingly demonstrated its determination to use all kinds of political and military pressure to impose this vision and rejected all partial compromises that could disrupt or put obstacles in this course.

Regarding Iran and despite the fact that all the current field developments exclude it from direct presence in the south, but the regime controlling the south is in Iran's interest. First, Iran has significant control within the Syrian regime and it can return to the south or any other regime-controlled area later following the end of the political pressure. Iran plays cards with great patience, it can bend in storms and would not stop at stumbling blocks or obstacles.

## 2. Southern Rebel Factions

The armed factions in Daraa and Quneitra represent the last presence of the opposition in southern Syria after the opposition factions left Damascus countryside last April. The battle is very important for the presence of opposition as a whole and for its military and political positioning. Losing the south will restrict the opposition to the northern region and result in the Syrian regime and allies preparing for a possible battle to control Idlib after reclaiming the south.

With regard to the southern factions, the battle is an existential one as losing the battle means losing everything. As such the options available to these factions are limited especially as their international protection, which provided them with an immunity over the past few years that was unmatched in other opposition-controlled areas, was lifted.

## 3. The United States of America

The de-escalation agreement in the south is considered the result of the efforts of the Presidents of the United States and Russia. Trump and Putin's efforts culminated in the announcement of the establishment of a de-escalation zone in southern Syria on November 11, 2017. None of the parties published the content of the agreement, but it was supposed to secure freezing fighting between the southern factions on the one hand and the regime and its international supporters on the other.

It can be said that for the United States, the importance of the southern battle is based on protecting the security of Jordan and Israel respectively, and keeping Iran and its militias out of this region.

Washington threatened to respond to any violations in Daraa prior to the start of military confrontations in Daraa Province. In a statement published on June 15, 2018, the US Secretary of State said in a statement that she will take the necessary measures to respond to regime violations in the de-escalation zone in the southwest of Syria. She added that since Russia is a member in the Security Council, it has more responsibility to use its



military and diplomatic influence with the regime to stop the attacks and force the regime to not launch any other military campaigns<sup>(8)</sup>.

But with the launch of the military operation in the south, the Central Operations Room confirmed that the US had sent a short letter to the factions' leaders on June 24, 2018. The letter states that the US understands the difficult circumstances they are facing, it advised Russia and the Syrian regime to not initiate any military action that violates the de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria, any decision made by the factions' leaders to confront the escalation has to comply with the factions' and their local community interest and should not be made on the assumption or expectation of an American military intervention.

While Washington did not issue a statement on the content of the letter, on June 22, the US representative to the Security Council called on the Syrian regime to stop the bombing, violations the escalation of violence and respect the de-escalation agreement. The USA representative also demanded that Russia stop the military operation or it will bear the consequences of violating the agreement.

Russia and the regime's control of Daraa does not constitute a strategic loss to the US as long as there are guarantees for the Israeli and Jordanian sides, especially guarantees that the Iranian-backed militias are not given access to the borders of the two countries. It is believed that Russia has already provided this guarantee to Jordan and Tel Aviv.

#### 4. Jordan

The Syrian south has become a strategic depth for Jordan since the opposition has controlled vast areas in the south in 2012. Jordan' interest in the Syrian crisis was limited to this geographical region. Jordan, through its privileged relations with Washington, Moscow and Tel Aviv, managed to keep the south out of the Russian targeted operations while keeping the southern factions isolated in their political and military understandings from the rest of the opposition factions.

Ayman al-Safadai, the Jordanian Minister of foreign Affairs, called for maintaining the de-escalation agreement before the outbreak of the battle of the south. On June 17, he said that Jordan is committed to the agreement and will continue to work with the US and Russia to keep the agreement as a step towards a comprehensive cessation of hostilities in the south and

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<sup>8</sup> "America Threatens: It will Respond to Regime Violations in Daraa," Enab Baladi, 15/06/2018 <https://goo.gl/VKhCzC>

a comprehensive political solution for the crisis. He added that Jordan has exceeded its capacity to absorb refugees <sup>(9)</sup>.

The interests of Jordan in the south of Syria include preserving this region as a region free from Iranian presence and not receiving more refugees. Jordan closed its borders to refugees after the battle began, and in the Jordanian Prime Minister issued a statement that Jordan does not want to receive any new refugees.

On the other hand, Jordan suffers from economic and security challenges. It has a direct interest in the opening of Nasib border crossing and the Damascus-Amman international road and achieving greater stability in the south as part of paving the way for wider stability in Syria within the scope of the political solution in Geneva. In principle, Jordan does not oppose Russia's objectives in the battle of the south including regime control of Nasib crossing, securing the international road and the Hija Railway because this would revive Jordan's economic situation.

Although Jordan does not oppose the regime's return to the south, it is still trying to secure a less painful exit for its allies in southern Syria. Jordan aims to keep its relations with the tribes in the region to prevent a humanitarian crisis at its northern borders. The tribes in Dara are important as they are socially connected to the tribes in Jordan. It must be noted that semi-organized public donation campaigns were launched in Jordan's northern cities to help refugees. The move helps maintain tribal relations and secures delivering aid to displaced Syrians inside Syria at a low political cost.

## 5. Israel

Israel perceives the Syrian south from the lens of protecting its national security from the Iranian influence. Israel may be inclined towards the option of keeping a power balance between the regime and the opposition rather than the regime forces' complete control of the region. The regime forces' complete control would be tolerated as long as there is an agreement among Russia, the US, Jordan and the United Nations that includes the south and ensures non-temporary monitoring mechanisms. Israel also approaches the Syrian south from the perspective of maintaining the Disengagement Agreement established in 1974 with Syria.

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<sup>9</sup> "Al-Safadi Confirms the Importance of Preserving the De-Escalation Agreement in South Syria," Jordan al-Ghad, 17/06/2018, <https://goo.gl/WYzguc>

These Israeli considerations were referred to in part by Israeli media reports after a preliminary agreement was reached following talks between the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin by telephone, and the Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his Russian counterpart Sergey Shoygu. The reports indicate Israel's support for the regime forces controlling three strategic points in the south; Tal al-Hara, Busr al-Harir and Nasib border crossing.

However, the US withdrawing its influence from the south after its failure to agree with Russia on reconsidering the de-escalation deal there, apparently resulted in Russian-Israeli communication. Russia may have offered Tel Aviv guarantees to preserve its strategic interests in that area especially when it comes to ensuring the area is free of Iranian presence.

Practically, Israel does not object to the regime presence at its borders especially as the regime has been there for decades and proven its effectiveness in protecting the borders and preventing any violation of the ceasefire. However, Israel fears the modified version of the regime where al-Assad does not possess actual power over the decision-making process, so Tel Aviv requires Russian guarantees.

#### **Fourth: The Expected Course of the Battle**

There seems to be no option on the horizon except for complete Russia control of the south with only minor detail options remaining or the material and human cost of this control. These options are tied to the form and type of responses that the southern factions will indicate.

The option of full Russian control is enhanced by the absence of American desire to reach a new agreement regarding the south in exchange for concessions for Moscow outside Syria. The absence of the American side allowed Moscow to reach bilateral understandings with Amman and Tel Aviv in response to the concerns of both countries about the Iranian presence. These understandings also secure their borders on the ground in the medium term.

Gaining complete control over the south will most likely happen over a series of stages starting with the eastern zone and then moving to the north of the western zone. Taking control of the Jaish Khaled-controlled areas will mark the end of the battle. It may take months if Russia wants to limit civilian losses and if an actual resistance is mounted by the factions. The battle may take weeks if Russia chooses to use excessive violence in a similar scenario to Douma or if the factions stop resisting.



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After gaining full control of the south, Russia will deploy its forces and police in all areas with a focus on the border areas with Jordan and the Golan.

In this scenario, Russia will not accept any type of negotiations with the factions unless it is to discuss the unconditional handing over weapons and subjection to Russian authority.

It is believed that opposition factions in the south will only be able to resist for several weeks in the best circumstances especially if the attacking forces are able to isolate the eastern and western zones and if there no logistical or humanitarian support for the factions and civilians from across the borders.



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