

August 2019



*Syria: Thousands Forced to Flee
Qunaitra and Daraa Silently*

Syria: Thousands Forced to Flee Qunaitra and Daraa 'Silently'

Forced conscription, dire living conditions, deteriorating security and the expiry of the settlement agreement, all contributed to the increase of displacements from the south

Background

In the latest wave of displacement to hit southern Syria (specifically the provinces of Daraa and Qunaitra) since 2014, and which believed to be the largest, estimated 25,000 young men have fled their hometowns,¹ after a settlement agreement concluded between the Syrian government and armed opposition groups,² since the beginning of this year till its August 7th.³

At the very least, 10 to 20 people are leaving Daraa and Qunaitra daily, due to the deterioration of the security and living situations, to begin a rough displacement/emigration journey, during which they are subjected to racketeering and exploitation. In many ways, they are asked to pay large amounts, sometimes in excess of \$3000, or otherwise handed over to Syrian authorities by Syrian army officers who take advantage of these illicit smuggling networks.

According to several witnesses, there are up to 20 smugglers running large and organized smuggling networks in the Syrian south. Most of those smugglers are Syrian Army officers of different ranks. They transport the leavers by their military vehicles from Daraa to Idlib in the guise of military or security missions.

The witnesses suggested that the displacements/emigrations are likely been staged by the Syrian government with the aim of emptying the Syrian south from its people, especially the youths and elites. That's why the Syrian authorities facilitate such migrations and take advantage of it to make arrests either for money or retaliation.

STJ field researcher reported the arrest, extortion and disappear, of several youths while taking smuggling routes fleeing the southern areas to seek a better life. In late November, the Syrian government forces arrested 12 youths fleeing the town of Al Harah, by ambushing them near Zamreen village, northwestern Daraa. Other seven youths; three from Al Harah and the rest from Saida village and Al Hrak city, were also arrested while on their way to the rebel-held areas in the north, specifically in western rural Hama, and they are still unaccounted for.⁴

¹ Correction; the version published on August 9, 2019 said that the number of youths estimated at 40.000. But after the report of the field researchers were consistent, it turned out that the number is estimated at more than 25.000.

² According to STJ field researcher, thousands out of the 1.298.752 population of Daraa along with 80.000 people from Qunaitra have emigrated. Besides, about 12.000 fighters of the opposition were displaced to northern Syria after refusing to reconcile with the government.

³ In July 2018, the Syrian government took full control over Daraa under a settlement agreement concluded with the Syrian armed opposition groups. The agreement was implemented in two stages under the guarantee of the Russian military police. The first stage covered the northern countryside and the Lajat area, while the second stage covered the rest of the province except the Yarmouk Basin, which was already taken by Syrian regular forces in early August 2018.

⁴ Correction and update; the 12 youths were released after three months (Added to the corrected version of August 21, 2019).

I. Causes may vary but fears are the same

The agreement concluded in southern Syria seen by people there to be not a fair and balanced agreement and that it was more like a capitulation agreement not a reconciliation one. As Russia- the guarantor- didn't keep its promises not to conduct arrests or reprisals against people and the elimination of the wanted lists beside the reoperation of government institutions and resume the work of their employees and to allow students to return to universities.

The lean and corruption of the government's institutions has led to feelings of despair for the future among the people in the south, especially the medium class, and consequently to their departure, which seems to be the only option they have. As the tense security situation, the dire socio-economic conditions, rising unemployment, the expiry of the settlement agreement in addition to the forced conscription, all were the reasons behind the youths' migration from the south, through the risky smuggling routes.

i. The security status

The overall security situation in southern Syria was tense, especially during June and July 2019, owing to the assassinations occurred against activists and former civilian and military opponents. Along with the attempted assassination against municipal leaders and people well known for their absolute loyalty to the Syrian regime, including informers, clerics and religious leaders.⁵

Besides, many arrests have been conducted by the Air Force Intelligence and the Military Security so far, on charges of collaborating with Israel, IS or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra Front) or working with the White Helmets (Syria civil defense) or on alleged personal claims.

According to STJ field researcher, an estimated 96 people were arrested in Daraa at checkpoints of the Syrian government forces during the first half of 2019, thus become the number of the arrested from Daraa between July 2018 and July 2019, 692 people, including holders of settlement cards, former members in the local councils of the opposition and relief workers. It's worth mentioning that the Syrian government forces increased the number of its checkpoints at the entrances of the town and villages in the Syrian south, where an estimated 118 military checkpoints were set up in the province of Daraa and over 17 in Qunaitra.

A total of 112 assassinations and attempted assassinations were documented in southern Syria after signing the settlement agreement. The result was the killing of 51 people and the injury of 38 others, including former local council members and nine military groups' commanders, who already reconciled with the government, as reported by several field activists in Daraa. In addition, 25 assassination attempts were carried out by unidentified persons in June 2019, which killed 13 people and injured 9 others, in consistent with the

⁵ STJ had prepared a report on the insecurity and mass assassinations in the province of Daraa after the Syrian government took over Daraa, February 25, 2019 <https://stj-sy.org/en/1194/>.

statistics provided by the Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office,⁶ which reported that during the period between August 1st and July 31st 2019, 14 attempted assassinations of former commanders and fighters of the armed opposition occurred, and resulted in the kill of 12 of them, in addition to 77 assassinations and attempted assassinations conducted against former fighters and commanders of the opposition, who had reconciled with the government and joined its forces' ranks. These operations resulted in the deaths of 45 of them. Besides 34 assassination attempts took place against civilians, killing 16 of them⁷.

ii. The living situation and access to services

People in Southern Syria are enduring poor living conditions with lack of access to public and humanitarian services, not like things were before signing the settlement agreement, as all of the international organizations have suspended their activities in the region,⁸ where only educational seminars and psychological support are now provided by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent of Daraa and Qunaitra.

All that contributed to a sharp decline in the standard of living and low-income rates, and a huge inflation in prices, fueled by the depreciation of the Syrian pound against the dollar. In addition to the widespread of unemployment; there are no jobs, and large numbers of employees were dismissed for several reasons, like being deserters or former employees at the opposition's institutions.⁹ That led so many youths to work in agriculture, but they were soon forced to give up, due to high fuel prices and the difficulty of selling the crop. Besides, huge losses occurred to the crop production due to late rains in 2019, and fires set to it, which the locals believed them to be arsons made by unknown people.

iii. Fear of conscription

More than 90% of the youths in southern Syrian are either draft evaders or deserters. Thus, they flee the region and prefer to go through risky smuggling routes than to join the never-ending military service and been sent to the front lines in the north. Almost every family has one or two youths wanted for compulsory service.

According to STJ field researcher, more than 400 youths from the provinces of Daraa and Qunaitra, have deserted the Syrian Army after being sent to the front lines in the north battels.

⁶ "Assassinations and Attempted Assassinations Continue to Occur in June 2019", Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office, August 20, 2019, <http://daraamartyrs.org/?p=19070>, (Added to the corrected version of August 21, 2019).

⁷ "The Violations Agreement - First Year Report of the Daraa Province Settlement Agreement", Daraa Martyrs Documentation Office, August 3, 2019, <http://daraamartyrs.org/?p=19127>. (Added to the corrected version of August 21, 2019).

⁸ STJ monitored the work of nearly 100 civil society organizations, who had carried out various activities in southern Syria from late 2012 until the middle of 2018. These institutions have adopted various programs in support of the humanitarian rehabilitation and reconstruction needs of the war victims in southern Syria and sometimes in other areas. However, all of those organizations were later disappeared, either by leaving the region or by dissolving themselves soon after the return of the Syrian government to control.

⁹ STJ had prepared a report on the dismissal of 93 teachers in Daraa without justifiable reasons, December 17, 2018, <https://stj-sy.org/en/1092/>.

In that context, one of the deserters, Mohammad J., who had joined the military service in March 2019, spoke to STJ saying:

“A lot of my fellow fighters died during the fierce battles in north Syria. I was waiting for the officer in charge to give me leave so that I could escape. Those, whom we are fighting in Idlib, are our brothers and I don’t fight my brothers. Indeed, I fled and would not return unless they arrest me.”

iv. Expiration of the settlement agreement

Among the reasons that prompted a large part of the people of southern Syria to emigrate is also the expiration of the settlement deadline extension in June 2019. As the National Security Bureau of the Syrian government renewed the "settlement deadline" on December 24, 2018, an end on June 24, 2019, after the first six months had expired.

As a result, the situation in southern Syria has become tense, and demands have been raised to extend the postponement of the deserters. The situation got worse after arrests were made. As by the end of the settlement extension period, the Air Intelligence forces arrested members of the Civil Defense in Qunaitra, prompting a large number of young people to leave the country.

The ‘immigration’ has become the street talk among young people in southern Syria. In every family gathering everyone declares his desire to leave the country, as reported by STJ field researcher.

STJ field researcher conducted a survey to measure the youths’ satisfaction with the living conditions and the security status after signing the settlement agreement and if they prefer to emigrate or not. 46 youths out of 50 said that they were not satisfied with the current situation and they wish to go abroad to seek a better life, but the fact that the smuggling routes are dangerous, stop them. As the migrators pay large amounts and constantly been attacked and abducted on their way through the two available routes:

1. The way to Turkey via Idlib

Which is the most dangerous way for the youths from the south to go through, due to the long distance between the north and the south, more than (272 km). the smuggler transport youths from Daraa and Damascus after concluding deals with him.

In this regard, STJ field researcher quoted a local source saying that:

“The migrants’ journey from southern Syria to Idlib costs \$2750, plus \$250 for those who want to enter Turkey. Damascus is the gathering point, where the migrants stay until their number complete, and then set off after one or two days. All of this is undertaken in cooperation with Syrian Army officials.”

Omar M., a smuggler, told STJ that he makes deals with Syrian Army officers to allow those youths through the route, either in batches or in one go. Another way, is to bribe the soldiers at the Syrian Army checkpoints on the road. But it is a very dangerous way and

depends on luck just like the 'lottery', as the soldiers may be replaced at any time, which exposed the youths to risk.

He added:

"The young men transported to Aleppo, where they stay another one or two nights in the officer's house, until we arranged for their entry to the territory under the control of the armed opposition groups, in exchange for agreed amounts. Basically, we bring the young men into Idlib province, without anyone being hurt."

2. The way to Lebanon via Homs:

It is the road favored by those who intend to hide temporarily from the war in Syria, and has the hope that the situation will get better soon. It is a low-cost road compared to that of Idlib and does not take much time. It is also less dangerous, as it costs between \$1,200 and \$1,400 per person.

STJ field researcher learned from a local source in southern Syria that those who want to take this way, transferred to Damascus usually by a military officer of the Syrian Army. Then they are taken to Homs, from where they enter Lebanon in coordination with officials of the Lebanese army, as they walk no more than 200 meters into the Lebanese interior, where there is a bus waiting to take them to Beirut.

II. "I realized that my brother was handed over to a checkpoint in Hama by the same officer who smuggled him"

Abdullah A. born in the village of Tell Shihab, Daraa in 1987, had previously obtained a settlement document. But, the bad economic situation and lack of job opportunities, in addition to the fact that he is frequently interrogated by the military security in his area for being a former relief worker in a civil society organization, pushed him to take the decision to emigrate to Turkey via Idlib. His brother spoke to STJ in this regard, saying:

"His decision to emigrate was not a shock for the family, since many of his friends were already gone to Idlib or Lebanon. The situation here is not sustainable; there are no work opportunities nor safety. Further, the security forces practice extortion on youths, as if it is one of their tasks. They always used to summon my brother and ask him to pay large sums to dismiss the charges filed against him by security services, as they claimed. Thus, the best choice for him was to flee the country."

With regard to the loss of contact with his brother in May 2019, he said:

"Abdullah made a deal with a smuggler, whom I didn't know, but heard him saying that he is a good one and had smuggled many youths before without any problems. On May 14, 2019, he backed his small bag, for the smuggler told him not

to take too much stuff, and said goodbye. The smuggler, who was a Syrian Army officer, held a document for a mission in northern Syria, so that there was no fear, as my brother said.”

The witness said that the next day his brother called and told his family in a tired tone that he had arrived in the city of Hama, and asked them to transfer all of the remaining amount for the smuggler, and continued:

“I asked him, are you ok? he said “yes”, and asked me to take care of my mother and to transfer \$2500 to the smuggler. After I did, I tried to call my brother many times, but his phone was off. About a week after, a man called from a Syrian security branch in Hama, and said that Abdullah was detained there, and told us to pay large sums in exchange for his release. Then, I realized that the smuggler had handed him over to one of the checkpoints in the city. I attempted to negotiate a lower sum but they insisted to take SP.10.000.000 in return of his release. Therefore, we had to sell a piece of property to secure the amount. My father went to Hama and handed them the full amount, but they didn’t release my brother. However, they swore he was fine and said that he was transferred to the investigation branch and then he will join the military service, for he was a deserter. Since then, we haven’t heard from him.”

III. We were three men and a ten-year-old child

Not only Abdullah, many other youths were extorted and arrested this way, including Amer M., 47, his son Omar, 10, his relative Ahmed, 32, and Ghaith, 28, who are all from the city of Jasim in Daraa. They went through the same dangerous journey for different reasons. Amer was repeatedly questioned by the Syrian security services, where he was told to go to the Palestine Branch in order to return to his job as a school servant in Jasim city. He feared arrest and decided to take the smuggling route in June 2019. Ghaith H. spoke to STJ saying:

“We decided to leave the country when we realized that our situation became critical, since Amer was wanted for the security services, while Ahmed’s name was listed among those wanted for the reserve service, and for me, I was a deserter. Therefore, we made a quick deal with a smuggler and soon we traveled a long distance until we arrived to the point from where we would enter Idlib. We were seven people, among us were two youths from Al Hajar Al Aswad area and another one from Qunaitra. Amer brought his ten-year-old son with him, for the procedures of the reunion of his wife and the rest of his children would be much easier if he reached Europe.”

Ghaith added about what happened when they came near Idlib saying:

“The smuggler asked us to pass in one go, but Amer refused, and supposed that it would be better to go in two batches. Indeed, we split into two groups; the first included Ahmed and two youths from Damascus, while me, Amer and his son, and

a youth from Qunaitra were in the second. The first group set off after the morning prayers and after an hour the smuggler told us that they entered Idlib unharmed. But Amer insisted, however, to call them himself to make sure of their arrival before his group set off. The smuggler refused and said that he would go and make sure of that himself, but he didn't return. Instead, he told us by a phone call a temporary checkpoint of the Syrian Army had ambushed and arrested them."

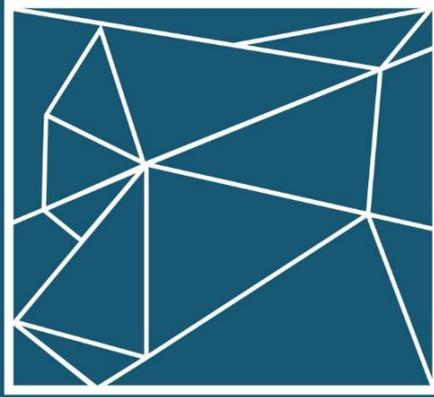
Ghaith added that his relative Ahmed was arrested by a Syrian Army checkpoint before crossing into Idlib. It turned out later that the smuggler was involved in their arrest. However, Ahmed's family learned through a lawyer they hired that he is detained at a security branch in Hama.

IV. We haven't heard from him since that night he was supposed to cross the Syrian-Lebanese borders.

The same fate was met by Tariq Sh., who was born in 1984, in rural Qunaitra. Tariq resolved his status to get travel permission, so that he could travel to Lebanon to seek work. But when he couldn't access there in a regular way, he decided to take the smuggling route. He spoke to STJ saying:

"When Tariq tried to enter Lebanon in a regular manner, he was rejected by the border officials, who asked him to go to the security branch 220 in Qunaitra. Indeed, Tariq went to that branch, and shocked to learn that he is accused of holding arms against the state, since he had never involved in any civilian or military anti-government activity during the opposition's rule. But, the investigator, however, told him that he had proofs confirm his involvement. Tariq stayed home waiting to get a travel permission for three months or so, during which he was summoned for further inquiries. But finally, out of desperation, he decided to travel to Lebanon illegally in March 2019. Indeed, he made a deal with a smuggler and reached Beirut in no time and without any problems. However, Tariq decided to return to Syria to support his family after his father was put into a coma by a horrible car accident. He took the same way back with the same smuggler, but we have had no news of him since the night in which he was supposed to cross the borders. We don't know what happened, but everyone says that the smuggler has handed him over to the government, since all those smugglers are agents for the regime, who uses them to arrest the youths wanted for it."

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

🌐 www.stj-sy.org

📘 [syriaSTJ](https://www.facebook.com/syriaSTJ)

🐦 [@STJ_SYRIA_ENG](https://twitter.com/STJ_SYRIA_ENG)

📷 [Syrians for Truth & Justice](https://www.instagram.com/Syrians_for_Truth_Justice)

✉ editor@stj-sy.org