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Concern over Repeating al-Sanamayn Scenario in Other Areas despite Settlement Agreement-Daraa

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This report addresses latest developments in the city of al-Sanamayn after a number of its neighborhoods were invaded by the Syrian regular forces and a new settlement agreement was concluded in March 2020

Introduction:

Heedless of the preliminary settlement agreement signed in Southern Syria in July 2018,¹ the Syrian regular forces have on March 1, 2020, launched a violent military attack on neighborhoods in [the city of al-Sanamayn](#), northern rural Daraa, where former armed groups of the Syrian opposition continue to be present, including Thuwar al-Sanamayn/Rebels of al-Sanamayn, under the command of Walid al-Atme, who is dubbed Walid al-Zahra and is one of the former fighters of the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya/Ahrar al-Sham.

Lasting for a day, the attack manifested in military clashes and confrontations between the two parties, and artillery and missile shelling by the Syrian regular forces, which took a toll on nine people, including three civilians, and caused the burning of a number of houses.

The attack ceased after a Russia-mediated negotiation process started between the two parties, resulting in a new settlement agreement in the city of al-Sanamayn, according to which 19 armed opposition fighters, who disapproved the new terms, headed to Idlib Province, and a stack of weapons was handed to the regular forces, while the Syrian Government pledged not to arrest any of the city's residents.

According to the field researcher of Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ, many of the al-Sanamayn City's residents are battling with anticipation and fear of the promises the Russian guarantor has made them, which included offering them protection from the Popular Committees and the Syrian regular forces in the city, given that former promises, made to the people in the cities of Daraa Province under the settlement agreement of July 2018, had resulted in 952 arrests, aimed at the province's people ignoring that they have signed a settlement agreement with the Syrian Government— this was the number documented² to the day this report was prepared, namely on April 15, 2020.

The locals of Daraa Province, for their part, responded to the attack with fear, as they are anxious that the same scenario would be applied in their area, following the suit of other of the province's cities and towns where there are former fighters of the armed opposition groups, including Jasim, Tafas, Daraa al-Balad, Nawa, and Jillen, given the incidents witnessed by the town of Jillen, western rural Daraa on March 18, 2020, when the missile and artillery

¹ Under the auspice of the Russian police, this agreement was put into effect in three stages—the first covered the northern rural parts and al-Lajat area in Daraa, the second extended over the remaining areas of the province, except for the Yarmouk Basin, which the Syrian regular forces took over in early August 2018. The third stage, however, was applied to the province of Qunitera. The agreement's key terms provided for the following: Surrendering border crossings to the regular forces, handing over the armed groups' light and medium arms to the regular forces and the return of employees to their positions. Additionally, the agreement demanded putting an end to arrests, prosecution and the release of detainees.

² According to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, 952 arrests were recorded, out of which 719 persons are yet held captive in the Syrian security services' detention facilities, and 190 were released. Nonetheless, 43 detainees were documented as have died due to torture. The center pointed out that of the documented detainees 446 are civilians, and 506 are members of the settlements (former fighters), of whom 929 are male detainees and 16 are females. These arrests took place in several areas, the most prominent of which are al-lajat in the Yarmouk Basin area, followed by the cities of Dael, al-Harra, Tafas and Sheikh Miskin.

shelling on the city of al-Sanamayn by the Syrian regular forces, stationed in Izraa and the city of Daraa, resulted in the death of seven of the town's civilians,³ two of whom were children, and the displacement of a number of families, which sought refuge in the town of Tal Shihab and the towns of the Yarmouk Basin. The attack took place after clashes between fighters of the armed opposition and the Syrian regular forces, knowing that the latter brought military reinforcements into the town's vicinity, killing two opposition fighters and wounding three others.

1. Al-Sanamayn City before Syrian Government Took over Full Range of Daraa Province in 2018:

While Southern Syria was controlled by the armed opposition,⁴ the city of al-Sanamayn, like other cities in Daraa Province, was a home to regime opponents and dozens of armed opposition fighters, who possessed light and medium weapons. The city, still, was not considered completely outside the grip of the Syrian regular forces, given that it contained a number of the forces' security centers and military divisions, such as the 9th Division, which at the time arrested many civilians and bombarded residential neighborhoods in al-Sanamayn and its surrounding cities and villages— the cities of Inkhil and Jasim included. Back then, al-Sanamayn bore witness to confrontations between the Syrian armed opposition and the regular forces, in which the opposition armed groups targeted government security and military centers.

On December 25, 2016, the Syrian regular forces besieged the city for several days, coercing the civilians and fighters into conducting negotiations that ended with signing a settlement agreement, stating that the armed groups surrender their weapons and pledge not to carry out any "terrorist operations" against the Syrian regular forces. Additionally, the fighters in the city and draft dodgers were to join the ranks of the regular forces and the Russia-affiliated 5th Legion.⁵ The number of signatories to the settlement agreement, back then, amounted to over 500 persons, including 150 opposition fighters. In the wake of the agreement, tension rose in the city, triggered by the practices of the regular forces, spread of checkpoints, and continued arrests, for popular/security committees were formed, encompassing people from the city and operated by the Syrian military intelligence service. The case continued thus until the Syrian government took control of the entirety of the province of Daraa in July 2018.

³ STJ's field researcher reported that the persons killed during the shelling are from the town of Jillen. They are: the little boy Mohammad Ali al-Faris, the little girl Rasha Nabil al-Zawahrah, Ali Hassan Mohammad, Saleh Hussein al-Wis, Fadi Mousa al-Jizawi, Nizar Mohammad al-Khalid and Tariq Mohammad Omran.

⁴ The armed opposition groups held reigns to power in southern Syria from April 2012 to August 2018.

⁵ Formed in late 2012, the 5th Legions is considered a major Russian military force in Syria. When the settlement agreement was implemented in Southern Syria in July 2018, most of the fighters of the opposition groups joined its ranks, led by Ahmad al-Awdeh, who was the former commander of Shabab al-Sunnah/Youth of Sunnah Forces.

2. Al-Sanamayn City while Syrian Government Controlled Daraa Province:

Dozens of pro-opposition civilians and military personnel left the city of al-Sanamayn towards Northern Syria, refusing the settlement agreement signed by the Syrian government and the armed opposition in July 2018. One of the agreement's terms provided for the return of the displaced persons to their cities and towns, according to which a number of fighters, originally from the city and who spread in various areas across Daraa Province, headed back to al-Sanamayn, some of whom signed a settlement agreement. Despite returning to the city, other fighters, nonetheless, refused to sign that agreement. One prominent figure of the latter group was the well-known leader Walid al-Atme, known as Walid al-Zahra, who was a former fighter under Ahrar al-Sham. Al-Zahra rose to fame in the city for being one of the key personalities to lead military operations against the Syrian Government in 2019 and early 2020, for he died in the last attack launched by the Syrian regular forces on the city of al-Sanamayn on March 1, 2020.

3. Series of Attacks and Assassinations Targets al-Sanamayn City following Settlement Agreement:

After Walid al-Atme, accompanied by his armed group, which referred to itself as Thuwar al-Sanamayn/Rebels of al-Sanamayn, entered the city when the settlement agreement was signed in 2018, security centers and military checkpoints were the target of a series of attacks, while mutual assassinations increased dramatically in 2019,⁶ aiming at the personnel of the Syrian regular forces and the popular committees, affiliated with the military intelligence on the one hand and at the fighters of the armed opposition on the other. Commenting on this, Ayham A., an activist from the city of al-Sanamayn, recounted the following to STJ:

“After Walid Al-Zahra and his group arrived in the city of al-Sanamayn following the conclusion of the settlement agreement in Daraa Province in July 2018, assassinations and attacks on security posts and military checkpoints of the Syrian regime in the city started taking place, reaching their peak in early 2019, for over 20 attacks were recorded in this year alone. The most known of these attacks, carried out on May 15, 2019, targeted the Criminal Security Center in al-Sanamayn, rendering dead more than three militants of the

⁶ “Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa”. STJ, January 13, 2019. Last visited: April 21, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/violence-and-assassinations-mark-a-sharp-increase-since-the-settlement-agreement-daraa/>.

Syrian regime. The Military Security's personnel, for their part, arrested three of the city's civilians. In early 2020, however, more than 10 attacks were recorded against several military and security posts, in addition to six assassinations and 12 attempted ones, mostly seeking figures of the Syrian regime, security service's militants, and government officials, such as the attempt to assassinate the head of the local governmental council in the city of al-Sanamayn on March 8, 2019. Furthermore, there was an attempt to arrest Walid al-Zahra on January 11, 2019, but he managed to escape, in the aftermath of a clash between his group and the Syrian security forces."

As the attacks against the Syrian regular forces mounted in early 2019, the source added, the forces cordoned the city of al-Sanamayn on May 15, 2019. The siege lasted for six days, during which civilians, as well as food, were not allowed in or out of the city. The Syrian regular forces reinforced their military presence by setting up new checkpoints and establishing dirt mounds near the security posts deployed in the city. This siege was lifted only after the city's elders intervened, reaching a truce that operated for a few days only, once again giving rise to assassinations and attacks against figures, centers and checkpoints of the Syrian regular forces, not to mention the indiscriminate shooting with which the regular forces targeted civilian homes, killing a number of them, including two children who died on July 18, 2019, and another child who died on November 19, 2019.

4. March 1st Attack Hails Full Control over al-Sanamayn City:

On the evening of February 29, 2020, the Syrian regular forces imposed a security cordon on the city of al-Sanamayn, bringing in military convoys that encompassed dozens of soldiers and vehicles, to begin their attack on the city from several axes at dawn on March 1, 2020. Resorting to artillery and missile shelling, the forces focused on the western and northwestern neighborhoods of the city, known for inhabiting fighters of the armed opposition. The attack continued throughout the day, during which clashes and confrontations broke out between the two parties, rendering nine people dead, including three civilians—Khalil Fahd al-Atme, from al-Sanamayn, who died as a mortar hit his house, which also caused his wife a serious injury, Mahmoud Mohamed Dahoud al-Saleh, also from al-Sanamayn, who died affected by the stray gunfire during the clashes, and Aser al-Saadi, from the town of Kafr Shams, who died in the artillery shelling on the city of al-Sanamayn. In addition to the deaths, a number of houses either caught fire or were partially destroyed as a result of the indiscriminate shelling of the Syrian regular forces. The city suffered thus until a settlement agreement was reached, providing for expelling the armed opposition's fighters to Northern Syria.



Photo no. (1)



Photo no. (2)



Photo no. (3) – The three photos show the destruction inflicted upon neighborhoods in the city of al-Sanamayn, as it was targeted by the Syrian regular forces' artillery shelling on March 1, 2020. Photo credit: al-Sanamayn-based media activists.

The latest agreement, al-Sanamayn-based media activist reported, stipulated a settlement under the auspices of the Russia-affiliated 5th Legion, under which armed opposition fighters were to join the ranks of the Legion and those who refused recruitment were to be sent to Northern Syria, in addition to which the Syrian regular forces had to pledge not to arrest any of the city's residents. The agreement also ordained that the opposition hands over a stack of weapons to the regular forces. Under the effect of the agreement, 19 fighters fled to Northern Syria, including three injured who arrived at the al-Zandin crossing that separates areas held by the armed opposition groups from those controlled by the regular forces in rural Aleppo.

The source pointed out that the last attack on the city of al-Sanamayn was carried out with the approval and participation of groups of the city's residents who had previously joined the ranks of the Syrian regular forces, led by Th. al-Abbas and A. al-Labbad, nicknamed al-Jamous, functioning as the commanders of the groups operating for the security branches of the Syrian regular forces in the city.

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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.

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