



10 May 2020



**Fresh Wave of Violence Storms
Already Vulnerable “Settlement
Agreement” in Daraa**

Fresh Wave of Violence Storms Already Vulnerable “Settlement Agreement” in Daraa

Between December 2019 and late March 2020, no less than 200 incidents of violence were registered, which mostly targeted persons affiliated to the Syrian government and its apparatuses

Background

Daraa province, south of Syria, is yet gripped by security chaos, which gave rise to assassinations, kidnappings and attacks on the security centers of the Syrian government between December 2019 and late March 2020.

These acts of violence, however, aimed at civilians and militants; some of whom were associated or / and affiliated with the Syrian government, including members of the reconciliation delegations, directors of municipalities, mukhtars/governors of neighborhoods and militants of the security forces and the Russian police. Others targeted persons who operated within the ranks of the former armed opposition groups, among them were leaders and former militants. Other incidents affected a number of former media activists and current relief staffers.

Covering this period, the field researcher of Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ recorded at least 200 incidents, which rendered up to 131 people dead and wounded dozens, both militants and civilians.

The documentation efforts indicated that most of these incidents had taken place in western and northern rural Daraa, especially in the cities and towns of Muzayrib, Tafas, Dael, Jasim, al-Shajara, Inkhil, Masakin Jaleen, Jumla, Nawa, Tasil and al-Sanamayn, among others. These areas are frequented by former fighters of the armed opposition, who have signed a settlement agreement with the Syrian government and were allowed to keep their light weapons. This enclave of Daraa is considered a highly-tensioned area, where arms are widespread. In this area, opposition military formations are still active, the most prominent of which is known as the Popular Resistance in the South.¹

The city of al-Sanamayn was the stage for the most drastic incidents throughout the period reported here, on the level of security tensions in Daraa that peaked in March 2020, when the Syrian regular forces launched a security operation to storm the city, the largest since the signing of the “settlement agreement.” STJ, for its part, had published a factsheet covering the offensive carried out against the city on 1 March 2020 and the “new” settlement agreement reached there.²

In the eastern enclave of the province, however, STJ’s field researcher recorded a slight increase in violence, especially in March 2020, which covered areas such as Umm Walad,

¹ On November 15, 2018, an armed group in Daraa announced the formation of a military movement, referring to itself as the Popular Resistance. In addition to raising the Syrian opposition’s flag —the green flag— the movement has adopted a number of operations that aimed at posts of the Syrian Government and regular army.

² “Daraa: Concern over Repeating ‘al-Sanamayn Scenario’ in Other Areas despite the ‘Settlement Agreement’,” STJ, April 22, 2020. Last visited: May 4, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/concern-over-repeating-al-sanamayn-scenario-in-other-areas-despite-settlement-agreement-daraa/>.

Karak al-Sharqi and al-Musayfrah, among others—areas less frequented by former fighters of the armed opposition.

In terms of numbers and ratios, the Syrian regular forces, their loyalist or affiliated forces and services were a target to about 60% of the total direct and indirect assassinations / incidents. The former fighters of the armed opposition, in addition to fighters who underwent a settlement agreement with the Syrian government and joined the ranks of its services were an aim for about 40% of the incidents.

Moreover, over the period reported, a new pattern of assassinations emerged, aiming at civil activists, including doctors, media and independent relief activists.

The violence and assassinations caused a dramatic deterioration of the living conditions in Daraa province, which prompted the spread of theft, kidnapping and organized crime, as well as bribery in government departments, in a manner both massive and overt.

Daraa province had already witnessed a marked escalation in the frequency of assassinations and incidents of violence in late 2019. Back then, 94 people at least were killed while more than 91 were injured, as a toll for the assassinations and attacks that took place in separate areas, mostly in the western rural parts, which are heavily populated by former fighters of the armed opposition, according to a previous report prepared and published by STJ.³

³ “Violence and Assassinations Mark a Sharp Increase since the Settlement Agreement – Daraa,” STJ, January 13, 2020. Last visited: May 4, 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/violence-and-assassinations-mark-a-sharp-increase-since-the-settlement-agreement-daraa/>.



Photo no (1): Map showing the towns and cities where assassinations increased sharply between December 2019 and late March 2020, especially in western and northern rural Daraa—namely areas frequented by former fighters of the armed opposition.

1. Up to 61 Assassinations Documented in Daraa Province:

Between early December 2019 and late March 2020, STJ's field researcher documented at least 61 assassinations in Daraa province. Of these assassinations, 60% aimed at former fighters of the armed opposition, who underwent a "settlement" agreement with the Syrian government, civilian activists, known for their anti-government activity while the province was controlled by the opposition, 2012-2018, and others who operated in humanitarian fields. Other assassinations, amounting to the remaining 40%, targeted figures affiliated with the Syrian government and its allied forces, including civilians and military personnel, who were either shot at or were made targets for explosive devices.

a) Former opposition commanders and settlement fighters assassinated

The number of targets, both former fighters of the armed opposition and those who carried out a settlement agreement with the Syrian government, amounted to 38 dead persons. The assassinations took place thus:

- **On 9 December 2019**, Maher Ibrahim Youssef al-Tamer, a member of Jasim city's State Security Service, was assassinated. The city is one of the areas most frequented by former armed opposition fighters. Al-tamer was shot dead by unknown persons. It is important to mention that al-Tamer was a former fighter of the armed opposition and that later on he signed a settlement agreement with the Syrian government.
- **On 1 February 2020**, the former commander of al-Haq/The Right armed group of the opposition, Gharib al-Massri, a Palestinian national, was also assassinated. Before his death, al-Massri signed a settlement agreement and held leadership positions under the Russian 5th Legion.⁴ Al-Massri was shot dead by gunmen in the al-Shajarah town, al-Yarmouk Basin — where a large number of former fighters of armed opposition are based.
- **On 19 February 2020**, gunmen assassinated the lawyer Yousef al-Dawwas from Maaraba town. They shot him dead in the town of Musayfrah, which is known for incubating groups of the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian forces, while only a few former fighters of the armed opposition are found there. Al-Dawwas is one of the people who underwent a settlement agreement with the Syrian government, after having previously worked in the court of Dar al-Adil in Houran/House of Justice in Houran and operated for a number of opposition factions.
- **On 25 February 2020**, unidentified gunmen shot dead Samir Aref Khalaf al-Massri and Qasim Mohammad Abdulkarim al-Subaihi in Muzayrib, which is frequented by former

⁴ 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.

fighters of the armed opposition. The two men underwent a settlement agreement and joined the ranks of the 4th Division. However, there is not an indication of their having operated under any of the armed opposition groups before.

b) Assassination of personalities affiliated with Syrian government and its allied forces

The assassinations targeted persons affiliated with the Syrian government and its related forces, such as directors of municipalities, mukhtars, reconciliation mediators, informants, security personnel, officers and recruits in the Syrian army, as well as fighters within the ranks of forces loyal to the Syrian government such as Hezbollah, Iran, and the Russian police. The marked assassinations are:

- **On 10 December 2019**, unidentified persons assassinated engineer Hassan al-Abdullah, director of al-Shajarah Municipality in the Yarmouk Basin area, west of Daraa. On board a motorbike, the gunmen shot al-Abdullah dead, while he was a target to several attempted assassination last year, all carried out by unknown gunmen. On the same day, STJ's field researcher reported, a militant of the Lebanese Hezbollah forces Zuhair Mohammad Abdulrahim al-Zamil was also shot dead by unidentified men in the city of Hrak. Additionally, the Lieutenant Ali Mohammad Askar, a liaison officer between the Military Security and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah, who accompanied Zuhair got wounded.
- **On 8 December 2019**, Ahmed Al-Nakhlawi was assassinated. Unknown persons shot him dead in Tafas city, west of Daraa. Al-Nakhlawi was a policeman, known for his allegiance to the Lebanese Hezbollah, based in the province.
- **On 22 December 2019**, unknown persons riding a motorbike in the city of Nawa, west of Daraa, assassinated two Russian police soldiers while they were at a military checkpoint in the city. On the same day, Sharaf Muhyiddin Jadaan, a brigadier general of the Syrian army, was assassinated. He died as unknown persons shot at his car, while heading to his military regiment. Jaadan's companions were also affected by the attack, soldier Mohammad Walid Tafakanji died and others were wounded.

c) New assassinations surge targeting civilian activists

In the period covered by the report, Daraa province became a site for a new pattern of assassinations, which focused on civilian activists this time, including doctors and activists who operated in the fields of media and relief, among others. Some of these activists were pro-opposition in the years leading up to the settlement agreement. The marked assassinations are:

- **On 19 January 2020**, unknown assailants put to death doctor Mamoun Qassem al-Hariri. They planted an explosive device in front of his clinic in the town of Busr al-Harir, east of Daraa, where only a small number of former armed opposition fighters

are based. Al-Hariri provided medical services to the opposition's wounded persons in the years preceding the settlement agreement. His brother doctor Hassan al-Hariri was also assassinated a few years ago by unknown persons.

- **On 2 February 2020**, doctor Mohammad al-Bardan, a resident of the city of Tafas, west of Daraa, was assassinated. Unknown persons shot him dead in Tafas, where a number of former fighters of the armed opposition are based. Al-Bardan served as the director of the Tafas Field Hospital when the armed opposition was in control of the city. Later on, prior to his assassination, he signed a settlement agreement and practiced gynecology.
- **On 19 February 2020**, a team of "Oxfam" volunteers was attacked on the road between the towns of Yadoudeh and Muzayrib, west of Daraa, where former fighters of the armed opposition abound. The attack rendered dead Wissam Khalil Hazeem and Adel Abdulrahman al-Halabi. A third volunteer, however, was seriously injured. Machineguns were used to attack the team on their way back from an evaluation of the schools' condition in the cities of Nawa and Tasil.
- **On 2 March 2020**, the media activist Abdulrahman Aqleh al-Qtaifan was assassinated in the city of Daraa al-Balad, which is frequented by a number of former fighters of the armed opposition. Two unidentified men shot al-Qtaifan and his companion Faysal Kamal al-Qtaifan dead and escaped. Al-Qtaifan was known for his anti-government activities.

2. No less than 30 Failed Assassinations Recorded:

STJ's field researcher documented no less than 30 failed assassinations over the covered period, which targeted almost equally well-known figures in Daraa, some of whom are loyal to the Syrian government and its forces, others are opponents, who signed a settlement agreement and joined the ranks of the Syrian government' security services, such as 4th Division, Air Force Intelligence, State Security, 5th Legion, etc. No deaths were recorded, but many injuries were caused, some were serious, not to mention the damage inflicted upon buildings, public and private properties. The most prominent of those failed assassinations are:

- **On 4 December 2019**, Captain Abdulhakim al-Abed, a former leader of the Shabab al-Sunnah/Youth of Sunnah faction of the armed opposition, was a target to a failed assassination. Al-Abed was wounded by unidentified gunmen in city of Inkhil. It is worth mentioning that al-Abed is one of those who conducted a settlement agreement in Inkhil and joined the ranks of the Russian 5th Legion there.
- **On 12 December 2019**, an attempt was made to assassinate the director of the al-Sanamayn Municipality Abdulsalam al-Hmaid, who was shot by unknown persons while at home in the city. No injuries were recorded. It is reported that the director was previously targeted on 9 March 2019, as a grenade was thrown at his home and car, causing the mild injury of a family member.

- **On 3 January 2020**, an attempt was made to assassinate Mustafa al-Masalmeh, known as al-Kassem, a former commander of the armed opposition, by planting an explosive device near him, close to al-Massri Roundabout in Daraa al-Balad. **On 19 January 2020**, Hummam al-Eid, commander of the Qassioun Brigades of the armed opposition, was also a target to a failed assassination in the city of Jasim, where there are many former fighters of the armed opposition. Today, al-Eid operates within the ranks of the Air Force Intelligence. Back then, the failed attempt rendered him and another person injured.
- **On 21 January 2020**, Maher al-Dandoun, the private driver of the member of the Syrian People's Assembly, Farouq al-Hammadi, was subjected to an assassination attempt on the Jassim-Nimer road west of Daraa. Unknown gunmen shot him and fled.
- Walid al-Rifai, a former fighter of the armed opposition, in the town of Umm Walad, was subjected to two assassination attempts. The first was carried out on **31 January 2020**, when unidentified gunmen targeted him at his home. The second, however, took place on **26 February 2020**, where unknown persons shot him also at his home in the town of Um Walad, eastern rural Daraa. On the second attempt, he was accompanied by his family, while he was seriously injured during the two attempts. Umm Walad is one of the areas where the influence of Iranian militias and the Lebanese Hezbollah is increasing, while only a few former fighters of the armed opposition continue to frequent it.
- **On 11 February 2020**, unknown persons in the city of al-Sanamayn, frequented by former fighters of the armed opposition, attempted to assassinate Mohammed al-Atma, a member of the General Intelligence Service, throwing explosive bombs on his house in the city. It has been reported that this was not the first time that al-Atma is made a target to an assassination.
- **On 13 March 2020**, gunmen on a motorbike shot Fadi al-Aassmi in the city of Dael, a home to a smaller number of former fighters of the armed opposition. Al-Aassmi survived the attack unharmed. It is important to mention that he was a former commander of the Jaysh al-Thawra/ Army of the Revolution of the armed opposition and had signed a settlement agreement. He was arrested and released several months ago.

3. Confrontations:

Over the past four months, at least 53 points witnessed confrontations between unknown gunmen or armed groups, who are most likely affiliated with the armed opposition, which still maintain their light weapons in accordance with the settlement agreement, and groups of the security and government forces. The clashes targeted several military checkpoints in different areas throughout the province.

In relation to these clashes, the city of al-Sanamayn, yet a home to former fighters of the armed opposition, was monitored as to have witnessed most of the confrontations. About 20

points, STJ's field researcher reported, were a scene to clashes, during which armed groups targeted the checkpoint in the village of Qaita and the Market, the District Directorate, the al-Jamiya, and the Sanamayn Hospital checkpoints, dozens of times. For the attacks, light and medium weapons were used, as well as RBGs, mortars, and explosive devices.

Most of these clashes, al-Sanamayn-based residents testified, took place between the armed groups that signed a settlement agreement in the city, led by Walid al-Zahra, which still maintain their light weapons, and the military security personnel, commanded by Thaer al-Abbas.

Faced by all this violence, the population of al-Sanamayn city and the neighborhoods of Houran, all cities and towns, demanded an intervention for ceasing the bloodshed in the city. The last of these calls was made by the city's dignitaries on 27 February 2020, who stated that an end must be made to the fighting that killed a number of the city's civilians, the last of whom was the little girl Belqis Muhanad al-Shatar. The repeated clashes in al-Sanamayn resulted in the death and injury of a number of civilians.

In response to the daily deteriorating conditions in the city of al-Sanamayn, the Syrian regular forces launched a security operation in the city on 1 March 2020, against former fighters of the armed opposition there, during which artillery and missile shelling was deployed, rendering a number of civilians dead.

Meanwhile, large portions of the province were taken over by security tension, the greater since the signing of the settlement agreement in 2018, as armed groups blocked many roads in the province, including the roads leading to Daraa city center and major roads and entrances to Daraa, Yadoudeh, Masakin, Sheikh Saad, Tsil and Tafas. At the same time, protests were held at several towns, including Busra al-Sham, Tafas, Muzayrib, Daraa al-Balad and Giza, condemning the military operation. The largest of these protests was held in the courtyard of the al-Omari Mosque in Daraa al-Balad.

The cities of al-Hrak, Daraa, Karak al-Sharqi, al-Musayfrah, Saida, Nahtah, Tasil, Koya, Sahim al-Golan, and al-Ghariya al-Sharqiya, areas where there is a large number of former fighters of the armed opposition, and where some of the Syrian army's reserve forces are also based,⁵ have witnessed several attacks on checkpoints of the Syrian regular forces, carried out by unknown persons. The most prominent of these attacks are:

- **On 7 December 2019**, unknown persons attacked a joint military checkpoint of the Military Security Service and the Russian 5th Legion in the town of Khirba, east of Daraa, less frequented by former fighters of the armed opposition. This operation resulted in the death a checkpoint militant and the injury of two others. In conjunction

⁵ The Reserve Forces (al-Quwat al-Radifa) are former members of the opposition groups who signed reconciliation with the regime to end the hostilities in Daraa province. It contains hundreds of fighters from the following groups: Liwaa Ahrar Tafas, Mu'taz Billah Army, Jaysh al-Ababil, Alwiyat Qasioun, Jaysh al-Thawra, the Headquarter Operation of Watasimo, al-Harrah Military Council, Tasil Military Council, Swords of Truth Room, Liwa Ahrar Qita, Manifest Victory Operation Room, in addition to other groups from the east of the province).

with this, unknown persons targeted another checkpoint of the Air Force Intelligence on the road between al-Musayfrah and Giza, without causing any casualties.

STJ's field researcher recorded two new incidents in the province, where armed groups detained and kidnapped militants of the Syrian army, stripping them of their weapons and threatening to kill them in the event that the security authorities did not fulfill their demands. This took place in the town of Nahhta, frequented by a large number of former fighters of the armed opposition on 11 January 2020. People from the city of Nahhta detained militants of one of the checkpoint on the outskirts of the city in response to the checkpoint's arrest of an **elderly man and woman**. In the same context, people from al-Karak al-Sharqi detained two checkpoint militants in the city, in solidarity with the people of Nahta. The Russian police intervened as a mediator and contributed to the release of the people detained at the security branches.

- Mustafa Fadel al-Qtaifan and Ahmad Fadel al-Qtaifan, two former fighters of the armed opposition, were kidnapped on 18 January 2020, by an armed military convoy of six vehicles, which came from the town of Nassib. The two fighters were released later on. The townspeople and the families of the kidnapped fighters accused Mustafa al-Masalmeh, known as al-Kassem, a former commander of the armed opposition, of the kidnapping incident. In turn, al-Masalmeh charged the two fighters with the assassination of his brother Wissam al-Masalmeh, known as al-Ajlouqa, with his accomplices, using an explosive device on 24 December 2019. It is reported that the al-Masalmeh brothers, former commanders of factions under the armed opposition, had conducted a settlement agreement and later on joined the ranks of the security apparatus in the area.
- The detention of a woman from Daraa al-Balad on 4 March 2020 by a Syrian government military checkpoint has triggered a state of security tension, which prompted opposition armed groups to block roads, while protests were held in the courtyard of the al-Omari mosque. The townspeople managed to release her, as a result of a negotiations process between Daraa dignitaries and the Central Committee in Daraa, a committee created in Daraa since the signing of the settlement agreement, which functions as a mediator between the Syrian government and the settlement factions.

4. Up to 15 Abductions Recorded in Daraa:

Violence and assassinations contributed to the dramatic deterioration of the living conditions in Daraa province, giving rise to theft, kidnapping and organized crime. In general, kidnapping in Daraa has grown into a lasting phenomenon, ever boosted, for 15 kidnappings were recorded there over the past four months. Some of these aimed at former fighters of the armed opposition, others affected civilians. The most notable abductions are:

- **On 24 December 2019**, unidentified persons kidnapped Lieutenant Ali Badran and Lieutenant Ali Ihsan, two officers of the 4th division in the town of Yadoudeh. The abductees were released after the notables of Yadoudeh managed to communicate with the kidnappers.
- **On 16 January 2020**, unknown persons kidnapped Mohammad Abdulrahim Ayyash, a resident of the town of Khail, and Layth al-Hariri, from the town of Saida. Being former fighters of the armed opposition and having signed a settlement agreement, they were both kidnapped in the town of Muzayrib and released later on.
- **On 19 January 2020**, unidentified persons kidnapped Thaer Munir al-Na'asan, from the town of Tasil and a student at the Veterinary Institute, while he was in Daraa al-Mahata. There is no information on his whereabouts so far.
- **On 10 March 2020**, unidentified persons kidnapped the little girl Salam Hussein al-Khalaf, 10, from Tafas, while on the way back from school. Salam's whereabouts were yet unknown when this report was being made, namely on 16 April 2020. Moreover, unknown persons kidnapped the boy Mazen Saiel al-Mahamid, 14, while on the way back from school in the al-Kashef neighborhood in Daraa the city on 21 March 2020. No further details have been obtained concerning his whereabouts. On 13 March 2020, three girls were kidnapped in the city of Jasim by unidentified persons. The girls, nonetheless, were released after a ransom of some 70 million Syrian pounds was paid to the kidnappers.

5. Explosive Devices Deployed:

STJ's field researcher recorded 13 blasts of explosive devices, used by unknown persons in Daraa. The key of the incidents, involving such devices, was the attack on a military vehicle of the Brigade 52, which was targeted somewhere between the towns of Namer and al-Soura, which are home to former fighters of the armed opposition, on 14 December 2019. Many were injured, for the vehicle was transporting officers and personnel. Three incidents were recorded in the city of Tafas, at different times.⁶ On 12 December 2019, an explosive device targeted a pharmacy, another exploded in the city on 30 January 2020. The third device, nevertheless, was used to blast a shop, suspected of selling drugs on 12 January 2020.

⁶ Local sources suggested that all three incidents were urged by personal disputes, one of which resulted in civilian casualties, while they all inflicted material damage upon property.

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