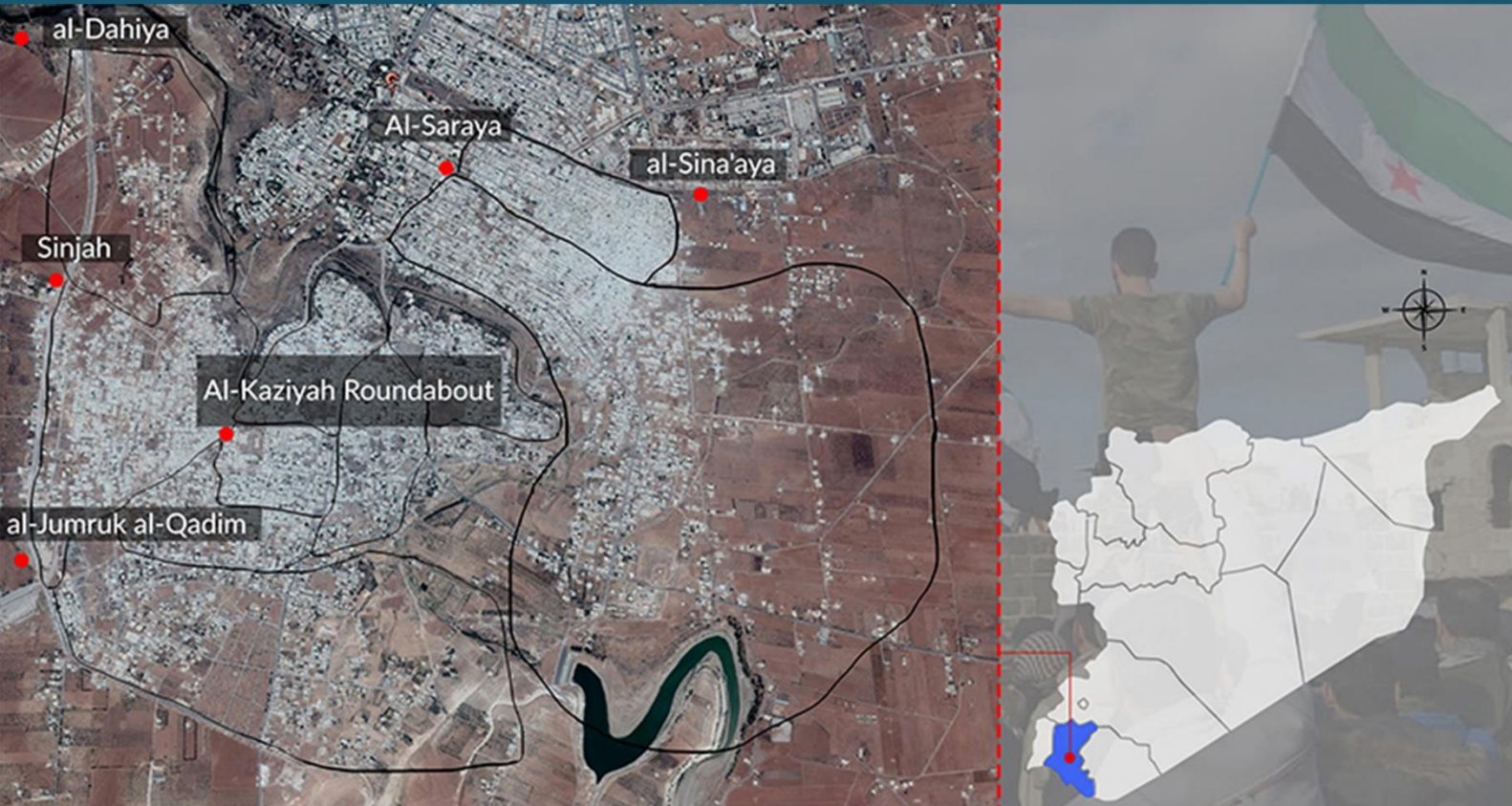


August 2021



Syria: A Timeline of the Siege of Daraa al-Balad

This report covers the causes and consequences of unrest in Daraa al-Balad between 24 June to 27 July 2021

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1. The Initial “Settlement” Agreement in Daraa

Syrian armed opposition groups—particularly, the al-Jabha al-Janoubiya (Southern Front) and a number of Islamist military factions stationed in the Yarmouk Basin and on the outskirts of the Lajat area— maintained control over large areas in [Daraa province](#), in southern Syria, for several years. However, in mid-June 2018, Syrian government forces, backed by Russian forces, launched a large-scale military operation into the region and retook it.

Figures published by the United Nations (UN) [demonstrate](#) that the 2018 military operation displaced over 270,000 people, while field researchers with Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) collected data indicating that the number of people displaced likely exceeded 400,000 persons.

In the aftermath of the military operation, the Syrian government, on 6 July 2018, signed a deal— today known as the “settlement agreement”— with the armed opposition groups that had controlled Daraa province.

2. The Settlement Reached After a Barbaric Operation

To restore control over Daraa province, government forces started their military operation in the Lajat region, in the province’s northeastern countryside.

From Lajat, government forces headed south, towards [Buser al-Harir town](#). They had the town in their grip almost 10 days later, on 26 June 2018.

After Buser al-Harir, the armed opposition groups lost control over several cities and towns, including the town of Nahta and the cities of al-Hrak, al-Malihah al-Sharqiya, and al-Maliha al-Gharbiya, as well as the military base of the 52nd Mechanised Brigade, which was located on the administrative border between Daraa and As-Suwayda.

On the heels of the military base’s fall, the Syrian government and armed opposition groups opened real negotiations. They held the first meeting in the town of Khirbet Ghazaleh, controlled by government forces, and then relocated talks to the city of Busra al-Sham, controlled by the armed opposition. During this time, other meetings were held in Jordan. Jordanian figures played the mediator between Russian officers and commanders of armed opposition groups.

The military operation waged against Daraa by government forces and the Russian air force widened the rift between armed opposition groups and increased intra-factional disputes. Some of the armed groups advocated for negotiating with the government, which would practically force them to surrender control over the area to government forces. Other factions opted for resistance and the continuation of the fight against government forces.

Later, after government forces seized control of the towns of Saida, al-Naimah, and Om elmiathin on 5 July 2018, all the armed groups operating in Daraa’s eastern countryside

acceded to negotiations and surrendered their areas of control. Simultaneously, armed groups in Daraa al-Balad and Daraa's western countryside continued to combat government forces' advances on the ground.

On 6 July 2018, government forces entered the [Nassib Border Crossing](#)—called Jaber Border Crossing on Jordan's side. That day marked the signing of the “settlement” agreement between representatives of the Syrian government and the larger percentage of Daraa's armed opposition groups. Notably, the agreement was signed in the presence of a large Russian delegation, but without Iranian participation. The agreement was first enforced in the city of [Busra al-Sham](#) and then in other areas across Daraa province.

The Yarmouk Basin, west of Daraa province, was left outside the settlement and was eventually militarily controlled by government forces sometime between late July and early August 2018. The basin, for over two years, was controlled by the Islamic State (IS) and the two extremist groups the Islamic Muthanna Movement and Khalid ibn al-Walid Army— who pledged allegiance to IS.

3. Locals Denied the Settlement's Details

None of the parties in the Daraa settlement officially published the terms agreed upon, nor the signed text of the agreement itself. Instead, the committees that negotiated on behalf of Daraa's population— consisting mostly of military figures— revealed only a few of the settlement's terms in the form of statements to the media, but they did not present media outlets with an official copy of the agreement.

According to the statements made by members of the negotiating committees, the “settlement” agreement provided for:

“Surrendering border crossings and the heavy and medium weapons the armed opposition groups possessed to government forces, re-operating government departments and allowing government employees to resume their work, legalizing the status of the area's wanted civilians and fighters, and providing male locals at the age of compulsory military service a period of six months to join the military, as well as putting an end to arrests, security raids, and releasing detainees.”

Field researchers with STJ confirmed that these were mostly the terms of the “settlement” agreement signed between the Syrian government and Daraa's armed opposition groups. The field researchers verified the terms through cross-checking available information on the agreement and interviewing one of the individuals who attended the meeting held on 6 July 2018, during which the terms of the agreement were recited before the attendees. The attendees included a high-ranking Russian officer, believed to be Alexander Zorin, Ahmed al-Awda— commander of the former opposition armed group Shabab al-Sunnah (Youth of Sunnah), which was later turned into the Russia-backed 8th Brigade, operating under the 5th

Legion— and Kenana Hawija—a representative of the Syrian government—, in addition to dignitaries from various cities and towns in Daraa province.

The source informed field researchers that during the meeting the Russian officer advised Daraa’s locals against leaving the province for Idlib, because Idlib will witness military operations in the future.

4. Anti-Settlement Groups Deported to Northern Syria

The rifts the agreement triggered were not limited to armed opposition groups. The agreement also divided fighters and the civilian population into two groups. One group refused to sign the agreement, interpreting it as a reconciliation with the Syrian government. We will refer to this group as the “unreconciled group”. The unreconciled group consists of approximately 12,000 persons, among them opposition fighters, their family members, and civilians, mostly from the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra.

The parties to the “settlement” agreement held several rounds of negotiations to discuss the fate of the unreconciled group and ultimately decided to relocate them to Northern Syria.

The second group, who remained in the province, included fighters, civilians, and activists. Most of the people within this group agreed to sign the “settlement” agreement. Therefore, we will refer to this group as the “reconciled group”. However, signing the agreement proved futile as government security services continued to harass many of the reconciled persons; arresting some and later assassinating others.

Among the fighters, four distinct sub-groups are identified in relation to the “settlement” agreement with the Syrian government:

- A. *Defectors from the Syrian army*: This group signed the settlement agreement and returned to the army.
- B. *Former armed opposition fighters*: These were civilians who joined combat and became commanders and fighters. These signed contracts for specific durations with the Syrian security services and the 4th Division of the Syrian army.
- C. *Former armed opposition fighters*: Like group B, these were civilians who joined combat, including particularly the Youth of Sunnah group, led by Ahmed al-Awda. These fighters were restructured as the 8th Brigade of the government-affiliated and Russia-founded 5th Legion.
- D. *Former armed opposition fighters*: These also were civilians who joined combat. This group’s members remained in various areas across Daraa. They refused to sign the settlement agreement, be deported to northern Syria, or integrate into any of the government forces’ military formations.

Under the 2018 agreement, Syrian government forces were deployed across Daraa province and reestablished their security rule over the area. However, a few areas of the province, especially in Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad neighborhood, and Daraa Camp for Palestinian IDPs,

remained outside the government's security service's grip, even though state service departments resumed operation there, including police departments, local administrative directorates, and healthcare centers.

5. What Triggered Recent Unrest in Daraa?

In early June 2021, the Daraa Central Committee (DCC), which negotiates on behalf of the residents of Daraa al-Balad, agreed to meet with the Russian Military Police and the Syrian government's Security Committee (SC). The meeting followed [protests](#) across Daraa province which decried the May presidential elections and the ensuing rumors that said "the Syrian government shall treat [Daraa] differently" after the elections.

Notably, the immediate reason why Daraa's people held these recent protests was to demonstrate their refusal of the presidential elections. However, overall resentment gripped Daraa's population long before the elections because they continued to battle with rampant insecurity, as well as [kidnappings and assassinations](#) that did not stop after the "settlement" agreement was signed in 2018.

Amidst the upheavals that Daraa was witnessing, the meeting between the DCC and the SC was held to discuss one recent incident in particular; namely when unidentified gunmen opened fire at the government forces-affiliated al-Saraya checkpoint, which separates Daraa al-Mahatta from Daraa al-Balad.

A source interviewed by STJ confirmed that the DCC condemned the attack on the checkpoint during the meeting with Russian and Syrian forces.

During the same meeting a Russian officer, called Assadullah, who is of Chechen descent, demanded that the DCC collect weapons possessed by the people in Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad neighborhood, and the Daraa Camp. For their part, the DCC responded that the people retained these weapons under the terms of the 2018 "settlement" agreement, which provided for handing Syrian forces only heavy and medium weaponry but keeping light weapons.

Several similar meetings followed, during which the DCC presented Russian delegates and government representatives a weapon-related proposal. The DCC agreed to surrender the light weapons kept by residents in Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad neighborhood, and the Daraa Camp in return for disarming the militias affiliated with government security forces that operate in the same areas, in addition to releasing the detainees. The proposal was rejected and the two negotiating parties failed to reach an agreement.

On 24 June 2021, government forces closed the al-Saraya checkpoint and summoned reinforcements to the areas surrounding Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad neighborhood, and the Daraa Camp, dismantled the checkpoints set up at these areas' entrances, raised dirt mounds, and cordoned the three areas.

Government forces opted for these tightened security measures to press the area's residents into surrendering the weapons they retained and to allow them to deploy security checkpoints inside Daraa al-Balad's neighborhoods. Terrified by these measures, 10,500 persons fled the area, out of the approximate population of 56,000, according to figures provided by the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, Mr. Muhannad Hadi on 30 July 2021.

Furthermore, on 30 July 2021, the UN [confirmed](#) the displacement of 2,500 persons due to violence and insecurity in late July, adding that several reports demonstrated the escape of about 10,000 persons from the area.

Hussain al-Rifai, the secretary of the Ba'ath party branch in Daraa and head of the Reconciliation Committee, denied that the Syrian government imposed a siege on Daraa al-Balad. These claims were at odds with the [statement](#) Hussain made to the Syrian *al-Watan* newspaper on 25 July 2021. In his interview, he told the outlet that the government had limited access to Daraa al-Balad to the Sinjah internal crossing, operated by government forces, as they had blocked all other crossings and neighborhoods.

6. A New Agreement

Following several failed rounds of negotiations with government representatives and the rising tension in the area, tribes and dignitaries in Daraa al-Balad held a meeting and assigned the DCC the task of negotiating for peaceful solutions to spare the area any military escalation. Indeed, the DCC signed a new agreement with government delegates sometime between 20 and 24 July 2021. The terms of the latest agreement were:

1. Surrendering all light and medium weapons, and any person who still hides a rifle or other weapons shall be held accountable and liable for the cancellation of his settlement agreement and ensuing targeting by the security services.
2. Deploying government security personnel and military posts inside Daraa al-Balad to guarantee security and safety.
3. The settlement of the status of wanted persons in Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad neighborhood, and Daraa Camp.
4. Issuing a pardon for the persons who left Daraa al-Balad with their weapons.
5. Complete disarmament of all armed groups, including those operating with the government's security services and other government-affiliated paramilitary groups.
6. Processing the affairs of compulsory military service evaders over 15 days through the draft center. In other words, legalizing their status and granting them deferments.
7. Legalizing the status of military service escapees and allowing them to rejoin their regiments, as well guaranteeing that they would not be legally prosecuted.
8. Allowing those wishing to leave the area to Northern Syria to exit, and possibly secure their departure and transport them there.

9. Legally prosecuting those who post insulting, irresponsible, or inciting statements on social media.
10. Removing checkpoints and dirt mounds once the terms of the settlement have been carried out, weapons surrendered, and life returned to normal in Daraa al-Balad.

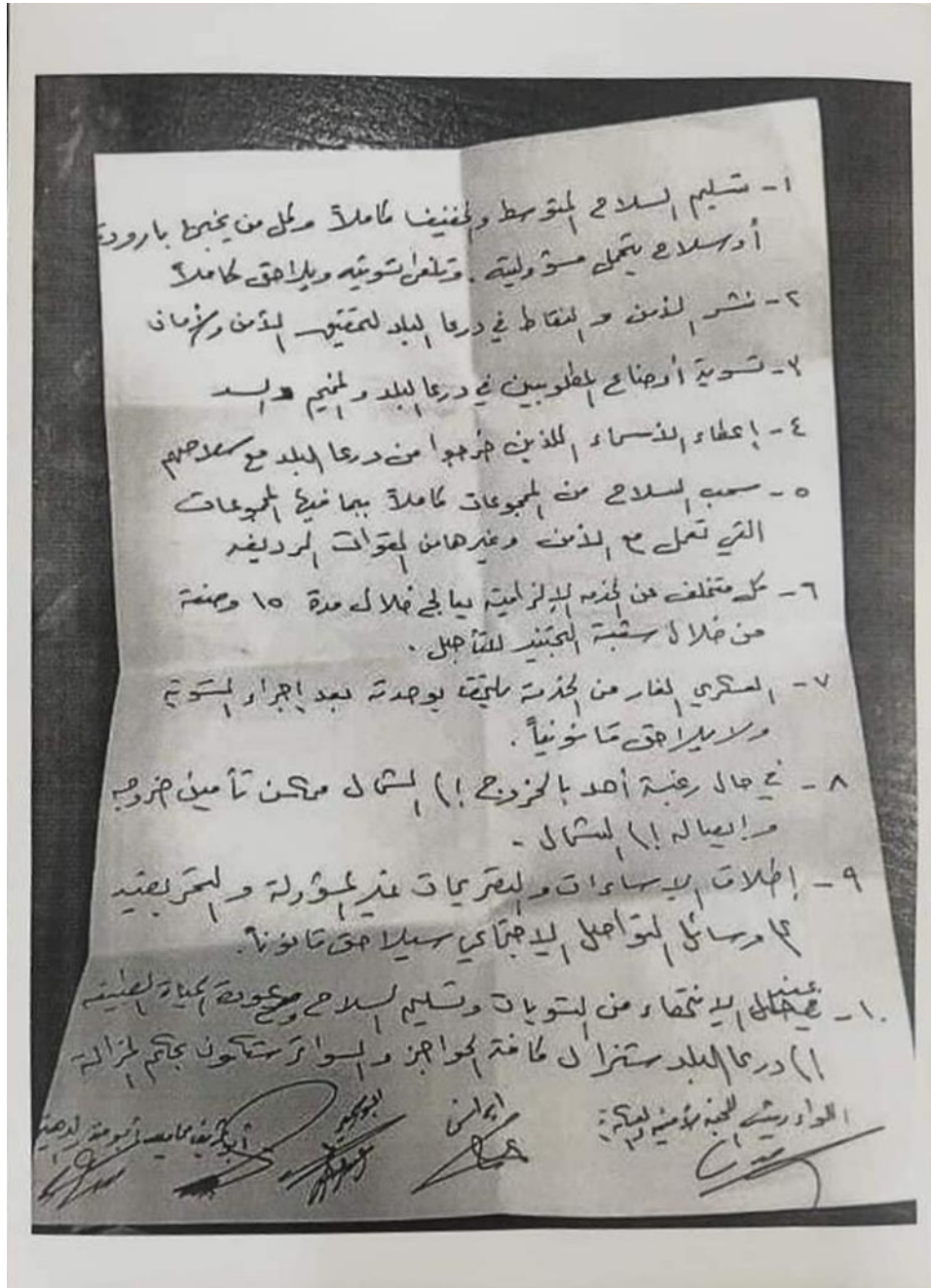


Image 1- A copy of the new agreement, published by persons close to the Syrian government on 27 July 2021. The document bears the signatures of the government's representative SC's head — Major General Mufid Hassan, the commander of the 1st Corps of the Syrian Army— and four of the DCC's members —Dr. Abdulrahman al-Masalmeh (Abu Anas), Adnan al-Masalmeh (Abu Sameer), Abu Sharif Mahameed , and Abu Munther al-Dihni.

The new agreement went into effect on 25 July 2021 and the government and the DCC soon carried out several measures. The government reactivated the al-Saraya checkpoint and set up settlement centers. For their part, the DCC surrendered an unidentified number of individual arms kept by the locals to government forces and Russian military police, and about 200 persons, both fighters and civilians, of Daraa al-Balad, Tariq al-Sad neighborhood, and Daraa camp registered their names with the settlement centers to legalize their status.

However, the agreement was short-lived. Soon after signing the agreement, government forces entered the al-Shayah farmlands and raided houses, searching for weapons. The raids provoked the fighters of Daraa al-Balad, who considered them a violation of the new settlement agreement's terms. As a result, the fighters engaged in clashes with government forces.

In retaliation, government forces retreated from all the areas they entered the same day, reinstated the siege on Daraa al-Balad, and bombarded its neighborhoods with mortar shells and heavy machine guns (HMGs). The agreement collapsed on 27 July and government forces resumed military escalation against the area.

7. A Broken Agreement

Speculation and news were rife about the reasons that lead to the collapse of the latest agreement. One source told STJ that the agreement disintegrated because government forces conducted house inspections in a manner locals found "provocative" and stole some people's possessions, which made the locals refuse to proceed with the inspections. Furthermore, the source added that government forces also tried to take all individual weapons without disarming the military groups affiliated with security services.

Other local sources told STJ that government representatives orally assured the DCC that some fake inspections would be carried out, like those conducted in Tafas, to boost the government's profile in the media and make it appear victorious. However, other sources claimed the Syrian army's 4th Division, commanded by Colonel Ghayath Dallah, sought to obstruct the settlement, and pressed for military escalation instead. The division's intentions were evident in the manner they carried out the searches for light weapons, the way they humiliated the locals, and the lootings they committed. These actions turned the locals against the agreement and ultimately led to its collapse.

STJ spoke with other sources who blamed the failure of the agreement on the practices of an armed group led by a person called Muhammad al-Maslameh (Abu Abdo), also known as al-Hafou. Al-Maslameh once operated within the ranks of IS in the Yarmouk Basin, west of Daraa province, and is currently stationed in the Tariq al-Sad neighborhoods. The sources said that al-Maslameh's armed group prevented government forces from proceeding with the inspections in the neighborhood, alleging that the DCC did not coordinate with al-Hafou.

A different set of sources said that it was the locals who aborted the agreement. The sources said that the locals refused the deal after they discovered that the DCC concealed the term entailing the surrender of all the light arms in the area, adding that the DCC published an incomplete version of the deal. The published terms were:

1. Today, on 24 July 2021, surrendering all the collected weapons—namely, the 200 arms that have been collected, but not all the light arms the locals retained.
2. Tomorrow, on 25 July 2021, resuming arms collection at 12.
3. On 26 July 2021, conducting settlements in Daraa al-Balad with the al-Saraya checkpoint.
4. On 27 July 2021, spreading security forces inside Daraa al-Balad in the form of military posts and checkpoints.
5. On 28 July 2021, dismantling dirt mounds and checkpoints, as well as reopening the roads leading to Daraa al-Balad after security forces have spread.

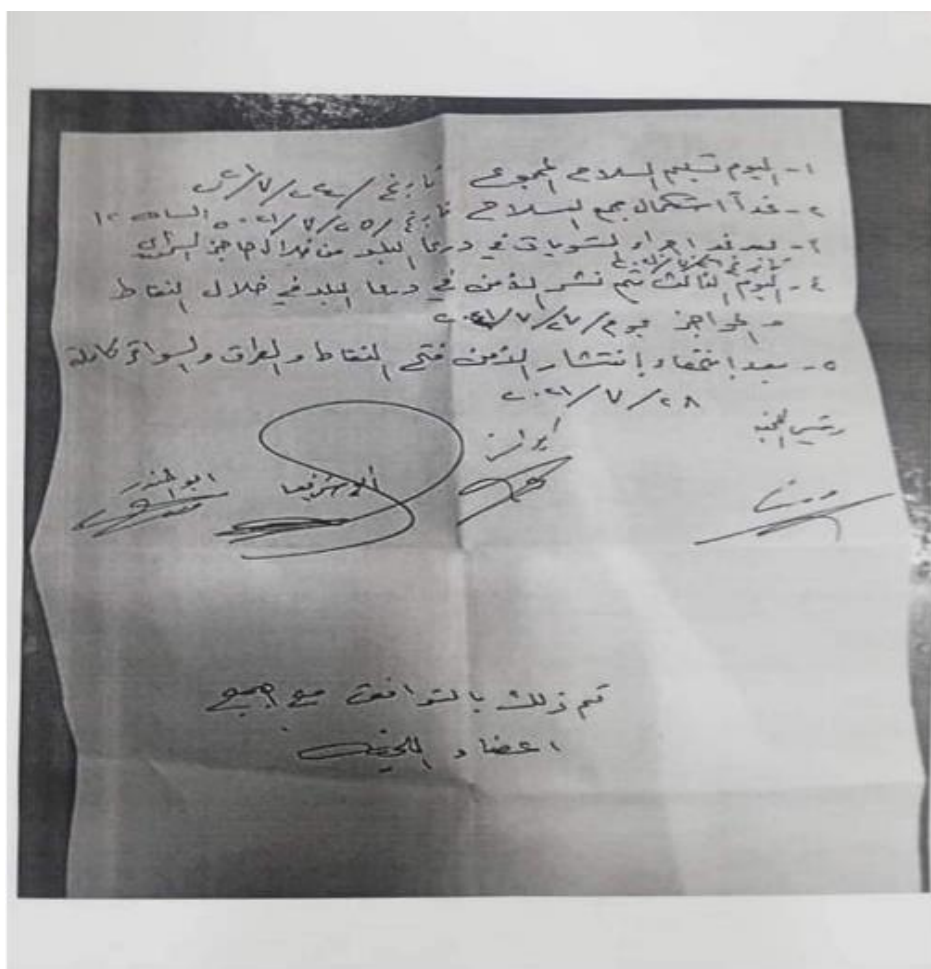


Image 2- A copy of the agreement locals referred to. A field researcher with STJ said that this version of the deal provided only the general guidelines for the detailed agreement and was signed in sync. The document bears the signatures of the government's representative SC's head — Major General Mufid Hassan, the commander of the 1st Corps of the Syrian Army— and four of the DCC's members —Dr. Abdulrahman al-Masalmeh (Abu Anas), Adnan al-Masalmeh (Abu Sameer), Abu Sharif Mahameed, and Abu Munther al-Dihni.

Locals said that the DCC presented them this general version of the deal but did not publicize the complete terms of the agreement.

STJ's field researcher reached out to a source informed of the course of events in Daraa. The source reported the locations that government forces planned to use for deploying checkpoints and posts. The source said:

“Later, we learned that government forces wanted to set up military posts in these locations: the building of the Ba’ath Party’s Shabibat al-Thawra/Revolutionary Youth Union, al-Karak roundabout, al-Kaziyah roundabout, the entrance to the al-Minshiyah neighborhood, the Daraa al-Balad post office building, al-Bahar Cemetery, the Daraa Dam, the al-Dulab roundabout, and the schools of Quneitra and al-Riba’i in the Tariq al-Sad neighborhood.”

Notably, the locations government forces chose to station in are identical to their positions in the area before 2011, threatening thus to return control over the area to the pre-2011 stage.

8. Key Actors in Daraa al-Balad’s Recent Events

Multiple actors played a role in the unrest in Daraa al-Balad and the failed settlement agreements. STJ provides background information on them below:

A. The Security Committee (SC) of the Syrian Government in Southern Syria

The Security Committee of the Syrian Government in Southern Syria (SC) was established in 2018 and chaired by several people. It is currently chaired by Major General Mufid Hassan—Commander of the 1st Corps of the Syrian Army. Two sub-committees are assigned to the provinces of As-Suwayda and Daraa.

Major General Hassan immediately heads the As-Suwayda Special Committee, while Major General Husam Louka — Head of the Syrian General Intelligence Division— oversees the Daraa Special Security on Hassan’s behalf.

Other members of Daraa’s SC are Brigadier General Dirar Dandal, Commander of Daraa Police Department, Major General Marwan Sharbak, Governor of Daraa province, Brigadier General Louay al-Ali, Head of the Military Security Branch, Brigadier General Oqab Saqer, Head of the State Security Branch, Brigadier General Khardal Dayoup, Head of the Air Force Intelligence Branch Daraa, and Brigadier General Osama Asa’ad, Head of the Political Security Branch.

B. The Russian Military Police

Affiliated with the Russian Reconciliation Center at the Khmeimim Air Base, the police have key posts in the cities of Daraa and Izra’ and an office in Busra al-Sham. Moreover, the police conduct routine patrols in the rest of the province. The Russian military police is currently headed by the officer Assadullah.

C. The Daraa Central Committee (DCC)

Formed in Daraa after the settlement agreement in July 2018, the Committee includes notables and former commanders of the armed opposition. Its tasks are to communicate and coordinate with the Syrian government and the Russian police and channel the residents' demands to them.

Members of the DCC include Nasser al-Mahameed—called Abu Sharif, who was the former commander of the opposition Liwa al-Tawhid (al-Tawhid Brigade)—, attorney Adnan al-Masalmeh, Abu Munther al-Dihni— former commander of the 18 Azar (March 18) military division—, Sheikh Faisal Abazid, Islamic education teacher, imam and preacher of Bilal Mosque—, Dr. Abdulrahman al-Maslameh— known as Abu Anas, an orthopedic surgeon and director of Daraa Al-Balad field hospital—, and Dr. Ziyad al-Mahamid, a member of the Daraa Local Council.

D. The 8th Brigade

Commanded by Ahmed al-Awda, the commander of the former opposition armed group Youth of Sunnah, the Brigade was formed by Russia after the July 2018 agreement and operates under the government's 5th Legion. The brigade is deployed in Daraa's eastern countryside and has complete control over Busra al-Sham and Ma'araba.

E. Pro-Government Militias Formed by Daraa's Residents Who Joined Pro-Government Forces

Daraa's residents formed multiple pro-government militias who joined pro-government forces during the arrest. They include:

1. An armed group led by Wassim Omar al-Masalmeh, operating under the command of the Lebanese Hezbollah militia.
2. An armed group led by Muhammad Bassam Turki al-Masalmeh, known as Abu Turki. The group is affiliated with the 4th Division led by Maher Al-Assad, brother of President Bashar al-Assad.
3. An armed group led by Mustafa Qassem al-Masalmeh, known as al-Kasm. The group is affiliated with the Military Security Branch/Military Intelligence. Before the 2018 settlement, al-Kasm operated within the opposition's al-Tawhid Brigade.
4. An armed group led by Shadi Bajbouj, known as al-Aw. The group is affiliated with the Military Security Branch/Military Intelligence Service.

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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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