



DARAA FRAGILE SECURITY DISRUPTED BY FOREIGN ACTORS AMID THE EMERGENCE OF NEW POWERS

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INTRODUCTION

The geographical location of southern Syria is the most important cause of conflict in and around the region, which borders Israel and Jordan, connects to Lebanon through Mount Hermon, and is considered a gateway to the Gulf states through the Nassib crossing. Daraa's geo-

graphical location has prompted many regional and international players to impose their control directly or through a local partner.

Even before the 2018 reconciliation agreement, Russia was forced to involve more than one party directly in these arrangements, such as Jordan, Israel, and the

US, which share one goal in the region: to keep Iran away from the borders with Jordan and Israel to a distance of 80 kilometers. However, Russia could not fulfill this agreement, despite continuously saying Iran is not present in the South. Furthermore, perhaps the most important thing that made the task difficult for Russia was Iran's ability to quickly change the form of its influence in the region and rely mainly on local forces from the people of the region.

Russia had to organize the armed factions in Daraa to observe the regional parties, requiring some of them to keep their light weapons and equipment. Russia also asked them to prevent the regime forces and Iranian militias from entering the faction-held areas, specifically Daraa al-Balad, Busra al-Sham, and Tafas, where the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps, led by Shabab al-Sunna's former leader Ahmed al-Awda, was located to balance the Iranian militias.

Name	Relationship with foreign actors		Local opponent	Degree of armament	Category	Type of deployment	Place of deployment	Current role in Daraa city
	Iran	Russia						
Former opposition forces	Bad	Good	4 th Division, Military Security, Division 311	Light weapons	Reconciled rebels not affiliated with the regime	Limited control and influence	Daraa city/ Daraa al-Balad	Defending force
8th Brigade	Bad	Very good	4 th Division, Military Security, Iran-backed militias, local Druze militia	Light and medium weapons, artillery	Special reconciliation in the 5 th Corps	Full control	Busra al-Sham	No public role
Popular Resistance	Bad	Bad	Regime forces and Iran-backed militias	Light weapons, IEDs	Former opposition fighters	No control	All the governorate	Attacks around Daraa
4th Division	Excellent	Weak	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Medium weapons, armory, artillery, rockets	Regime army	Security and military control	Daraa city, Daraa western countryside, al-Yarmouk Basin	Attacking force
Division 15	weak	good	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Medium weapons, armory, artillery, rockets	Regime army	Military control	South east As-Suwayda	Artillery, reinforcement
Tiger Forces/ Division 25 SF	Good	Excellent	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade	Medium weapons, armory, artillery	Regime army	Military presence	Daraa city	Limited attack
Lebanese Hezbollah	Excellent	weak	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Medium weapons, artillery	Foreign militia	Military and security control	Daraa-Damascus highway, eastern and western countryside	Attacking force
Al-Radwan Battalions	Excellent	Weak	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Light and medium weapons	Local militia	Military presence	Daraa city	Attacking force
Military Security branch	Excellent	Good	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Light and medium weapons	Security force	Security presence	All the governorate	Security presence
Air Force Security branch	Excellent	Good	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Light and medium weapons	Security force	Security presence	All the governorate	Security presence
National Defense Force (NDF)	Excellent	Good	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Light and medium weapons	Auxiliary forces	Military presence	Northern and western countryside	Attacking force
Local Defense Forces (LDF)	Excellent	Weak	Reconciled rebels, 8 th Brigade, Popular Resistance	Light and medium weapons, artillery	Regime army	Military presence	Northern and western countryside	Attacking and reinforcement force

The 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps is a unique case in Syria, as the Russian-backed group is not an ally of the regime and is at odds with the 4th Division as well as Iran-backed forces.

MAP OF INFLUENCE AND CONTROL OF LOCAL FORCES IN DARAA

The security and military formations in Daraa operate without an explicit agreement formula that regulates movement and work. The agreements made by the parties among themselves are considered fragile and had a direct role in further fragilizing the security situation in Daraa. The Syrian regime, supported by Iran and Hezbollah, aims to regain absolute control of the Daraa governorate, while other local parties seek independence in managing their control areas. The following table shows the armed forces currently in Daraa.

RUSSIA AND IRAN: FRAGILE RELATIONS AND UNDECLARED CONFLICTS

Russian attempts to control the security scene

Since 2018, Russia has restructured the region to help the regime regain control through reconciliation agreements, displacements, and a commitment to keep Iran and its militias away from the Israeli and Jordanian borders. In this context, Russia is involved from time to time in local is-

sues such as settling problems related to arbitrary arrests or brokering between the regime forces and former opposition groups. Despite Russia's attempts to fulfill its local and international commitments, the process was problematic due to three main reasons:

a. The Russian role does not seem to be welcomed by the regime, which believes that it has the right to have full and exclusive control over the southern region.

b. Reconciled opposition groups accuse Russia of failing to fulfill its obligations and favoring the regime at the expense of its promises to the opposition.

c. Israel lost confidence in Russia's ability or desire to confront Iranian influence in southern Syria, so it relied on its own efforts to combat Iran's presence by targeting military sites run by Iran and its militias, especially in As-Suwayda and Quneitra.

Despite the deteriorating security situation and the ongoing escalation, Russia still believes that its way of dealing with southern Syria is the best method possible amid the severe divergence of position and interest between various players. At the same



1st convoy of regime opponents leaves Syria's Daraa.

time, Russia is seeking to develop mechanisms to control these divergences. Perhaps the most important among them is the one aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the 8th Brigade of 5th Corps to achieve balance with the regime forces and Iranian militias, as well as continuous coordination with Israel regarding its borders with Syria.

1. The role of the 5th Corps in Daraa

The presence of the 5th Corps in Daraa is particularly important, as one of the brigades includes the 8th Brigade led by Ahmed al-Awda, who was leading the "Youth of Sunna" faction in the Free Syrian Army. The 8th Brigade was formed in 2018 after the reconciliation agreement between the regime and local opposition groups under Russian auspices. The agreement allowed the majority of remaining fighters to keep their weapons and gave the Russian military police security control in specific reconciled areas.

The 8th Brigade in Daraa included most of the "Youth of Sunna" fighters and was later joined by many others from various factions that disintegrated after the reconciliation. The Brigade is mainly concentrated in and around Busra al-Sham, east of Daraa. According to local observers, their commander, Major General Ahmed al-Awda, is known for his kinship with Khaled al-Mahamid, a Syrian businessman residing in the UAE and close to Russia. Since before the reconciliation, Al-Mahamid has been a supporter of al-Awda and his "Youth of Sunna" faction. Al-Awda also visited the Russian Hemimim base, communicates with Russian officers directly, and visits Jordan frequently. Ahmed al-Awda was able to attract young men from Busra al-Sham and other areas in Daraa. He even announced his intention to form a united Houran army of twenty thousand fighters to fight the Syrian people's enemies, alluding to Iran and Hezbollah.

Unlike other brigades of the 5th Corps in other governorates, the 8th Brigade is directly affiliated with Russia and not with the Syrian regime and its forces in the slightest. This gave it a unique status that sometimes escalated tensions, such as entering into a conflict with the 4th Division of the regime forces linked to Iran and chanting revolutionary slogans. On some occasions, the Brigade engaged in limited skirmishes with the regime's security services, especially the Air Force Security, and mutual assassinations.

Russia relied on Ahmed al-Awda, who could not possibly have influence over the entire region, especially in the western countryside, due to the resentment of some former opposition groups against him over several disagreements when the opposition groups were controlling the governorate. The Iran-backed forces seized this opportunity and began to penetrate the western region and recruit locals as militias.

RECENT SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS IN DARAA IN APRIL, MAY, AND JUNE

Since the beginning of the year, the Syrian regime has been attempting to enter faction-controlled areas in Daraa. In February, following a conflict with local factions, the regime forces signed an agreement to displace the population of Tafas to northwestern Syria. These military operations were temporarily halted before the presidential elections to reduce the tension in the governorate, which was relatively successful with a slight decrease in the number of assassinations and attacks. The presidential elections represented an opportunity for the regime to mobilize its supporters in all regions. However, this plan did not succeed in

Daraa and Quneitra, when local activists began issuing statements rejecting the presidential elections and threatening to close polling places. Indeed, Daraa and Quneitra did not witness a celebratory atmosphere for elections like others. Locals prevented regime supporters from participating in the elections in these governorates, who feared being targeted if they took part in the elections and subsequent celebrations for the victory of Bashar al-Assad. The governorate of Daraa witnessed several demonstrations and activities against the elections in the cities of Daraa, Tafas, the towns of Ahsam, Nawa, and Al-Sahwa, in addition to several attacks on polling stations the day before the elections in Mahja, Khirbet Ghazala, Western Maliha, Eastern Karak, al-Harak and al-Taybeh. There was a low voter turnout in the governorate, which was limited to government employees, students, and some regime supporters from the local population. The regime sought support from Daraa and Quneitra residents before the election. It offered a one-year postponement of mandatory conscription/military service, allowing young people to move easily in and outside the governorate without fear of arrest. Local young men expressed their relief after the postponement was passed because it would help some of them to obtain permission to leave the country or continue studying at universities.

The post-election period was characterized by security restrictions against civilians and the implementation of punitive measures against the people of Daraa. The regime forces carried out several arrest campaigns in the city of Daraa and some cities and villages in the western countryside. Several people were arrested at checkpoints in

and outside the governorate. Within this context, the regime also began setting up new checkpoints on the roads linking the towns and villages of the western countryside of Damascus to the city of Daraa and increasing the controls at the checkpoints inside the city.

From a military perspective, the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps increased its involvement in the regime forces' military operations against ISIS in eastern Syria. The 8th Brigade was established after the settlement agreement in 2018 from former opposition fighters and is led by Ahmed al-Awda, the former commander of the "Youth of Sunna" faction. The Brigade sent about 400 fighters in several batches to frontlines against ISIS in the Syrian Desert and Homs' eastern countryside, despite the mounting opposition of its fighters. Indeed, the 8th Brigade fighters have shown increasing opposition to being deployed to fight against ISIS for several reasons, including the failure of the regime forces to stop the continuous attacks by ISIS and fear of possible retaliation against them or their families by ISIS sleeper cells in Daraa. On the other hand, many believe that this increasing opposition may be a form of revenge against the Brigade

and an attempt to weaken the local anti-regime leadership in Daraa due to the lack of support to the Brigade members stationed in the Syrian Desert during military campaigns against ISIS. Increasing tension between the 5th Corps and the 8th Brigade led the Corps to withhold the salaries of fighters refusing to fight ISIS, followed by the refusal of local leaders to hold elections in the areas controlled by the 8th Brigade. This situation may result in further escalation between the local population and the regime in the future.

Daraa also witnessed more civilian recruitment for Russian security companies. Horan Free Media published a report on the first batch of young men from the governorate who traveled to Russia to be trained and deployed as civilian contractors in Armenia and other countries. The report states that the drafting process is carried out by persons linked to the mercenary recruitment offices in the As-Suwayda governorate, provided that medical and security approval is presented. Russian companies had previously recruited young men from Daraa to fight alongside Haftar's forces in Libya. The dire economic and security situation, as well as the mandatory service, are

The fact that 1000 assassination attempts have taken place since July 2018 shows how much the security situation has deteriorated in Daraa; with most attempts, to the benefit of the Assad regime, targeting former rebels.

Daraa al-Balad is one of the few neighborhoods of the Daraa city that has remained until now under the control of the population with little to non-existent interference by the Syrian regime.

among the main reasons the governorate's youth choose to become mercenaries.

1. Daraa al Balad

One area that has witnessed the Syrian regime's most significant repression in the post-election period is Daraa al-Balad. In this period, the regime implemented several actions, which created a situation similar to the siege imposed on Daraa in 2011: dirt barriers have been set up by the regime forces to block all entrances to the area, leaving only one single road open. This escalation has several reasons beyond the mere boycotting of the elections by the local population. The regime demanded the residents to fully surrender their weapons and hand over men wanted by the security forces. It also requested that regime forces be allowed entrance to certain areas and conduct house searches for weapons. The demands to dignitaries of al-Sanamayn by the Russian Reconciliation Centre also included a list of names of around 140 young men from the city accused of possessing and concealing weapons. According to members of the Central Committee in Daraa, a committee of notables who were former leaders of opposition factions and bodies, the

demands of the regime's officers and the Russians were more of a threat. They saw these demands as repressive measures against the local population and retaliation to what happened in Daraa al-Balad and its western countryside. Within the context of systematic forced displacement in Syria, and recently in the city of al-Tafas, many consider this practice a new attempt to displace more individuals of Daraa's youth to northern Syria.

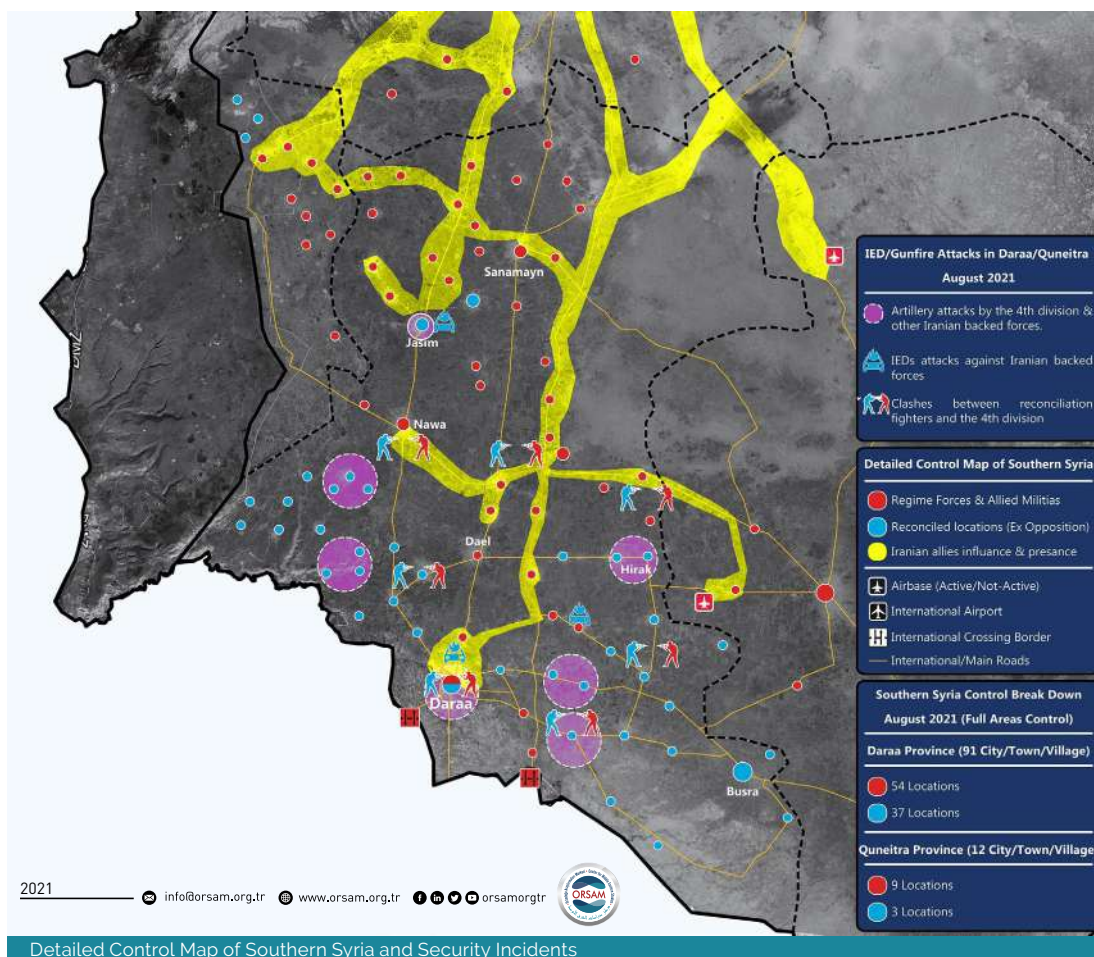
In early June, security officials requested the Daraa Central Committee to hand over personal weapons and make new settlements, in addition to allowing regime forces to enter Daraa al-Balad area. After the Central Committee rejected these requests, the regime forces cut off all roads to Daraa al-Balad except for one in an attempt to besiege the area and put pressure on the residents. The residents complained about the regime's imposition of barriers to entry of food and medical supplies, which increased their prices, reminding the time when the regime besieged areas in the Daraa governorate in 2011. After about a month and a half of siege and negotiations between the Central Committee and the head of the General Intelligence Services, Ma-



Major General Hossam Louqa, the two parties reached a Russia-brokered agreement on 25 July. The agreement contains several items to be implemented within five days, including the surrender of 60 medium and light weapons to the security forces, withdrawal of the regime forces from the outskirts to three military points to be established by the army, and a settlement agreement for about 135 people. The agreement also includes the withdrawal of militias affiliated with the security services and stationed near the area—a step that disturbs the locals.

However, prior to the agreement, the regime forces had been mobilizing forces to the outskirts of the city of Daraa. On 27 July, al-Ghaith Forces, one of the militias of the 4th Division under the command of Brigadier General Ghiath Dala, stormed the Daraa al-Balad area and clashed with some residents before they withdrew and shelled residential areas with mortars and heavy machine guns. Local sources reported that the attacks left

one civilian dead and injured five others, including a child. The intrusion prompted the Central Committee to ask the regime and Russia to fulfill their obligations under agreement terms before the meeting between the committee and regime officers for a new round of negotiations. Behind the intrusion lies Fourth Division's, and by extension, Iran's desire to have the upper hand against the regime in Daraa and the South, as the Fourth Division would not be able to achieve its objectives with an agreement between the security services and the locals. This was also mainly the reason for the escalation in areas in Daraa and Quneitra. The escalation of tension seems to have come after the visit of Jordan's King Abdullah II to the United States, where Biden presented his view on Syria. Biden talked about a possible restoration of relations between Arab countries in exchange for the regime distancing itself from Iran and pushing back Iran-backed militias from southern Syria.



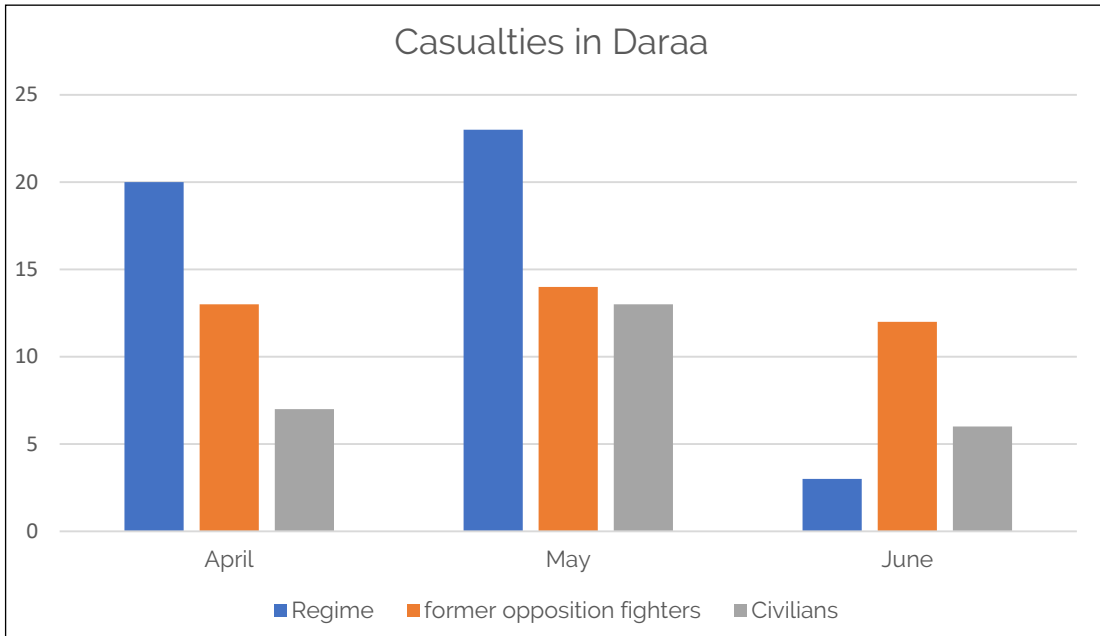
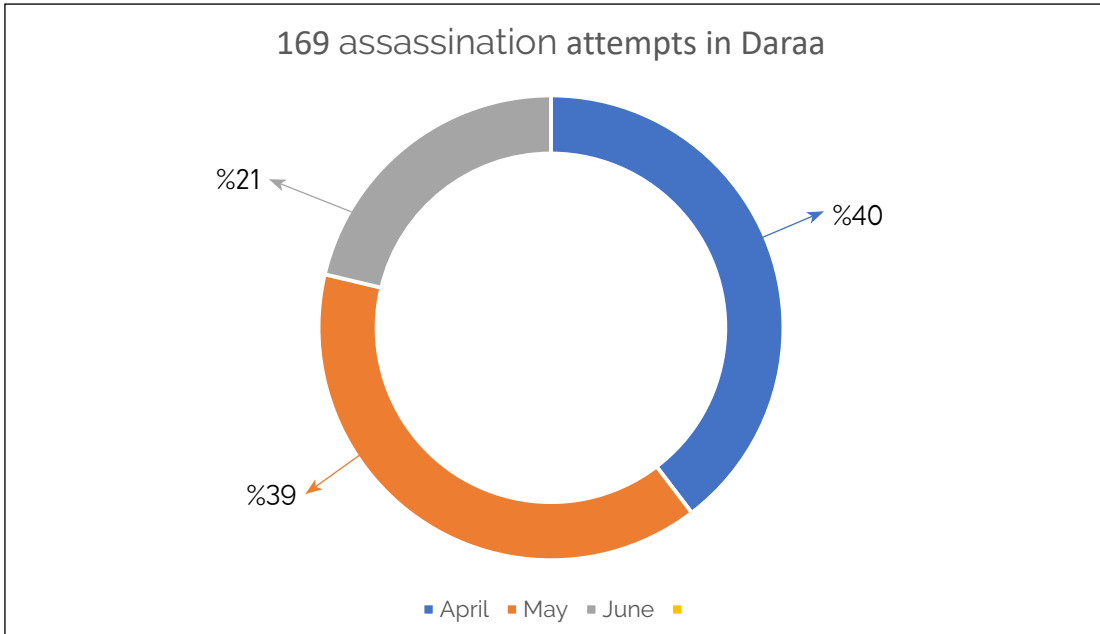
2. Assassinations

This period witnessed a sharp increase in the number of assassination attempts in the Daraa governorate, recording the highest number since the beginning of this year. According to the figures of the Martyrs Documentation Office in Daraa, there were 169 assassination attempts and operations in this period, where 104 people were killed and 45 were wounded. The distribution of assassination attempts by month is as follows:

The month of April witnessed 67 assassination attempts where 41 people were killed, including 13 former fighters of the

armed opposition factions and 7 civilians. 20 members of the regime forces were killed at the regime's checkpoints. In May, 66 assassination attempts resulted in the death of 41 people, including 14 former fighters and 13 civilians, whereas 23 members of the regime were killed. While the numbers decreased slightly in June, with 36 assassination attempts that left 22 people, including 16 former opposition fighters and 5 civilians dead, 4 civilians were killed at regime checkpoints, as seen in the graphic below:

The assassinations mainly targeted former fighters of the armed opposition fac-



tions who joined the regime forces after the reconciliation or did not join any armed party. Civil servants in the local councils were also targeted, such Faisal Allouh, the may-

or of A'atma town. These figures show that several factors play a role in the deterioration of the security situation, including the regime's attempts to impose its presence

in the governorate and its continuous violations, and the emergence of a rift between the residents and former opposition fighters that joined the regime forces. These operations lead to more polarization and social complications among the governorate's people, continuously deteriorating security. Although the main suspects in these assassinations are the regime forces and ISIS, the governorate also witnessed clan clashes and kidnappings for ransom.

The killing of Aref al-Jahmani in the town of Saida on 27 June has been the most significant assassination. Al-Jahmani is considered one of the most important members of Hezbollah in the Daraa governorate. He was the main person in charge of recruiting local

fighters in the ranks of Hezbollah and Iranian militias. Al-Jahmani was a leader in the Yarmouk Brigade, a former armed opposition faction, before joining Hezbollah after the reconciliation agreement. He had previously survived a murder attempt in early June after unidentified perpetrators shot dead Ayoub al-Shaabin, the right-hand of Al-Jahmani and a former leader in the Yarmouk Brigade, in mid-April, also in the town of Saida. ISIS also claimed responsibility for 12 attacks against the regime forces, which led to the killing of at least 18 soldiers and officers in machine-gun attacks. Note that these attacks took place throughout the governorate and not only in the Yarmouk Basin, which was under the organization's control before 2018.

CONCLUSION

Since the reconciliation agreement in the summer of 2018, Iran aims to use southern Syria as an advanced frontline against Israel and Jordan. It aims to do so by stretching inside the community using regime army and local militias, which occurs in the form of escalating tension leading to the displacement of locals and deploying its auxiliary forces inside new areas. However, having found themselves under pressure without any external help, the locals learned they must put aside disagreements and form a

unified front to stop Iran's aggression in the Daraa governorate. On the other hand, Russia wanted to use the reconciliation deal to reach other areas but failed. Despite guaranteeing Israel and Jordan that it would keep Iran away from their border, Russia could not stop this from happening. This shows that Russia does not have a realistic understanding of the dynamics in former rebel-held areas, particularly southern Syria. Russia's unrealistic and reactionary approach may lead to further instability and escalation, raising doubts over Russian plans for northwestern Syria.

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