

Assad's Forces Move Toward Daraa

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Brief Analysis

At the beginning of May, the Assad regime dispatched major military reinforcements to the city of Daraa in southern Syria. Regular reports appeared that there would soon be a military operation in the province carried out with Iranian backing. In response, a new uprising broke out in Daraa, with dozens of residents coming out to protest the mobilization of Syrian regime forces at the city's outskirts. The events suggested that Iranian and other affiliated sectarian militias would face heavy resistance, and that the people would call on the regime's "Russian guarantor" to take up its responsibilities agreed upon months earlier.

This escalation has unfolded right before the second anniversary of the "[settlement](#)

[\(https://www.harmoon.org/news/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%B4%D9%91%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%AF/\)](https://www.harmoon.org/news/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%B4%D9%91%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%AF/)" deal signed between local forces and the Russian Khmeimim base in June 2018. The deal had aimed to end the military operations headed by Moscow against the southern Syrian province during the prior month and a half and establish a new set of expectations between locals and the Russian-backed regime forces.

The Syrian regime, backed by [Russian forces \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-long-term-ramifications-of-russias-short-term-syria-strategy1\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-long-term-ramifications-of-russias-short-term-syria-strategy1)—and with U.S. acquiescence—were able to end offensive operations throughout southern Syria on July 31, 2018. With official Russian sponsorship and guarantees, residents and the regime reached an agreement that outlined settlements on a variety of issues. These included releasing prisoners, settling the status of those wanted by the security forces, facilitating the return of refugees and displaced people, and the gradual revival of civilian government institutions—such as schools, hospitals and services—in a manner that included a degree of decentralization. Russia also sent dozens of military police as observers to ensure the implementation of the agreement.

Now, two years after the deal, the regime is trying to disavow all of these agreements with southern Syrians and is attempting to regain the Daraa province by force. In the interim, no [goodwill initiatives](#)

[\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/exploring-russias-humanitarian-intervention-in-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/exploring-russias-humanitarian-intervention-in-syria) have been offered to the people of the south; no schools have been built, no electrical lines connected, no prisoners released and no displaced people assured safe return. On the contrary, the regime has tried to disregard much of what was agreed upon and has sent clear signals to local residents that it has no intention of maintaining

these agreements. In the local daily news, one regularly hears of assassinations between opposition leaders and regime representatives, mutual kidnappings to release prisoners, and security breakdowns. Regime forces are now operating as gangs, competing against civilians.

Aside from a complete failure to adhere to the 2018 agreement, a number of regime considerations have contributed to the regime's current military campaign against Daraa. As the nucleus of the initial protests against the regime in 2011, the regime has a sustained fear that protests in Daraa could develop into a continuation of the Syrian revolution. Conflict in Daraa also serves as a way to mask the regime's economic failures by shifting focus to a continuation of the war.

The regime also fears the people of Daraa province as a tight-knit, stubborn society with an independent streak. New local leaders who command influence and respect have come on the scene who are radically different from the military figures who led over Daraa before the regime took control of the area. These civilian figures could become a nucleus for the continuation of the revolution against the regime. If this mobilization continues, it will create a serious threat for the Russia, Iran, and the regime. Thus, the regime believes that the agreement has expired and that all of Daraa must return unconditionally to regime authority without any regard for Russian guarantees.

With the spread of the coronavirus, the weak economy, and the emergence of unmet demands for social service and economic development after the regime's declaration of "victory," suppressing Daraa allows to buy time and delay paying out the dues of victory to its loyalist class. It also enables the regime to withdraw its army from Idlib, where it now has nothing to do, and occupy it in Daraa. Local residents understand that the regime has not changed and will not change, and have begun to try to resist it to stop its illegal and immoral actions, sometimes through force of arms.

Russian neglect and Iranian adventurism has also contributed; Moscow was unable to maintain the pledges that took place under its auspices, including the agreement between local residents and the regime. The weak Russian position has played a major role in encouraging the regime to attack Daraa. After negotiations failed between the two sides, Moscow appeared to become a spectator rather than a guarantor. What they did offer Daraa was the opportunity to join armed Russian groups and to travel to Libya to fight or to the Syrian region of Suweida to fight ISIS.

Without any visible commitment to the agreement, the regime believes that the agreement brokered by Russia has expired and that all of Daraa must return unconditionally to regime authority without Russian intervention or military support. As the Russians are constantly balancing their actions between supporting the regime and trying not to become submerged in the Syrian quagmire, this equation provides the regime space to work even when it is against the Russian ideal, so long as Russia is not willing to commit to pushing back. **The Russians for their part do not appear to care a great deal what the regime does internally, especially if this intervention does not much affect the overall Russian strategy toward Syria. 0**

For the **Iranian angle (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/hezbollah-and-iran-in-syria>)**, the southern area has major strategic importance for the regime's ally, which is trying to create a foothold near the border with Israel. Such a foothold would provide it with leverage if Iran were to become subject to an American-Israeli military campaign.

Iran has also acted as a catalyst in encouraging the Syrian regime to attack Daraa. The Iranian position is based on the Astana agreement, which serves as a cornerstone for Russian-Iranian-Turkish cooperation to end the Syrian crisis in a way that preserves the interests of these three countries. On that basis, the Russians have agreed to provide Turkey with assurances on the ground, guaranteeing their safety and their ability to achieve their aims in Idlib and the area east of the Euphrates. Iran believes that Russia should give them the same strategic and security rights in

Syria's southern region—south of Damascus up to the border with Israel—so that it can counter any American-Israeli military escalation and strengthen its position in any negotiations around its outstanding issues with the West.

The more international **pressure increases on Iran**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/fikraforum/view/hezbollah-and-iran-in-syria>) and the more Israeli strikes continue against Iranian targets inside Syria, the more Iran will insist on bolstering its presence on the border with Israel and therefore on canceling the agreement the Russians sponsored between local residents and the regime and putting an end to what it sees as a state of chaos in the south. The Syrian regime is happy to justify Iran's actions, stating that Iran is fighting terrorism whenever it undertakes military action.

Throughout the truce in Daraa, Iran continued to build up allied forces under a number of different banners. It has expanded its military bases in the south and has taken no note of what the Russians do or say in terms of agreements with the Israelis and Americans, based on the principle that Russia cannot protect Iran from the Israelis, so it should give them room to fight them alone. Iran has set up the Shia Military Brigade 313 headed by Ibrahim Merji, based in Izra' for this purpose. The brigade, linked to the IRGC, is composed of about 1,200 fighters and is designed to defend Iran's interests in the area, including the strategic weapons storehouses in the southern region. Thus, the truce in the south is not actually in Iran's interests, since it is trying to impose its control over the southern border to threaten Israel and to maintain leverage that could help reduce the economic and political blockade imposed on them by the West.

In the end, it appears that a war by the regime against the people of Daraa is coming, as it will either be supported or ignored by the powers at play. However, the different needs of these forces will define the length and extent of this new war, which may be limited in order to prevent a new displacement to Jordan—displaying the failure of Russia, the regime, and Iran to take control of Daraa.

Even so, this escalation can and should be stopped. Especially in light of the coronavirus outbreak now spreading in Syria, all active parties in Syria must stop using the language of war and abide by their commitments with regard to southern Syria. The ongoing escalation against the southern areas will result in a security threat to neighboring countries, particularly Jordan and Israel, which may intervene to protect its borders and could bring the Syrian crisis back to square one. ❖

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