

# Growing Tensions in South Syria Signal More Regime Attacks

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Given the Syrian army's recent deployments in Deraa and Russia's half-hearted attempts to halt them, the situation may soon lead to renewed shelling of civilian areas and myriad complications for Israel and Jordan.**

Over the past few days, tensions have been rising to dangerous levels in Deraa, the southwestern Syrian province that shares frontiers with Israel and Jordan. Partly enabled by the [ceasefire further north in Idlib province \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-astana-process-a-flexible-but-fragile-showcase-for-russia\)](#), the Syrian army and its Iranian-sponsored Shia militia allies seem poised to renew heavy fighting with Sunni Arab groups in the south, as evidenced by the arrival of significant military reinforcements. Drawn primarily from the 4th Division, these units include the elite corps commanded by President Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher, and special forces from the 15th Division. They join the forces normally in charge of the region: the 9th Division's 52nd and 38th Brigades.

Combined with a long series of assassinations in the area and increased regime attempts to storm local towns, the deployments create the impression that a violent explosion may soon be in store. Confrontations around Deraa could easily spill over to neighboring governorates: Quneitra to the northwest (along the Golan Heights frontier) and Suwayda to the east (home to a large Druze community).

## FAILED PACIFICATION SET THE STAGE

The current crisis stems from the Assad regime's inability to reassert control over Deraa province after recapturing it from myriad rebel factions in July 2018. Once the United States, Israel, and Jordan chose not to support local insurgents they had previously assisted, Russia facilitated the Syrian army's return to areas it lost

earlier in the war by concluding “Settlement of Status” deals with numerous groups. Under these agreements, rebels were asked to surrender their heavy arms in return for immunity from arrest and exemption from compulsory military service (though many of them were invited to enlist in pro-Assad, pro-Iran, or, more often, pro-Russia militias). Those who preferred to leave their homes were transported to the Idlib enclave on the Turkish frontier.

Despite these efforts, however, many strongholds are still in the hands of former rebel factions that have maintained their old chains of command and expanded their ranks, boasting thousands of fighters in total. This is the case in the inner sections of Deraa city, certain towns to the east (e.g., Busra al-Harir), and various areas to the west (e.g., Tafas, Nawa, al-Yadudah, Saham al-Golan, and portions of the Yarmouk river basin formerly controlled by an Islamic State affiliate).

Thus far, Russian mediation has prevented the regime from launching an all-out assault and kept the rebels from declaring a new insurgency. For example, Moscow’s emissaries have been in touch with the “Birthplace of the Revolution” opposition council in Deraa city following armed incidents; they also act as go-betweens for local Druze leaders and their Sunni Arab adversaries in the Houran region, who are engaged in turf wars involving dozens of kidnappings.

Even so, violent skirmishes occur nearly every day, and popular demonstrations against the regime have become an evening routine in many places, with crowds calling for the removal of Shia militiamen and warning the army not to attack. Last week, members of “Central Committees” from all over the province gathered for an emergency meeting to demand that Russia uphold its “Settlement of Status” obligations and prohibit Assad from mounting an offensive. Although Moscow has forced advancing Syrian units to pull back in some localities, Assad’s troops remain poised for attack on the edges of several other towns, close enough to hit them with artillery barrages if they so desired (as occurred in Sanamin in early March).

Meanwhile, army personnel are frequently being attacked on the roads, and nine regime police officers were killed by a lone shooter inside their station in Mzairib village on May 5. The suspect is the leader of a rebel group that had signed a settlement agreement with the Russians; subsequently, his son and son-in-law were killed by Syrian troops, spurring him to seek revenge. Under pressure from Russia, some of the town’s inhabitants stormed his house after the shooting and torched it, but they did not deliver him to regime authorities.

More broadly, local political activists report that April alone saw twenty-five assassination attempts against Syrian military personnel, fourteen of whom lost their lives. Attacks have also targeted elements of the 5th Corps, a militia that Russia formed by recruiting ex-rebels. According to the Turkey-based Syrian opposition organization Jusoor, various actors conducted at least 384 assassination attempts in the province between June 2018 and April 2020, 92 percent of them successful. Around 135 were directed at rebels who joined the regime, while 205 were aimed at local notables deemed “unreliable” by Assad’s security agencies. In the latter case, operatives from air force intelligence and other agencies have apparently engaged in a systematic campaign to eliminate prominent ex-rebels, often striking when the intended victims stop at one of the army’s numerous roadblocks. Many residents in the south no longer venture out of their villages for fear of such attacks. In addition to raising local tensions, the violence has severely curtailed trade and contributed to Deraa’s very high unemployment rate of around 50-60 percent.

## **DERAA WANTS DRUZE-LIKE AUTONOMY**

**T**he vast majority of residents in Deraa do not seem to desire another major conflict. They recognize that they are at a military disadvantage, divided into poorly armed factions with no expectation of foreign assistance. This sentiment was reflected in a video posted by well-known former rebel commander Adham al-Karad on May 13, where he urged the army to withdraw from the outskirts of Deraa and stated, “If a war is imposed we will fight, although we do not want it.” According to the news site Al Modon, he emphasized that the people’s objective is “an

agreement that does not oppress the southerners and preserves their dignity.” For their part, Assad’s field commanders have demanded that local factions disarm and asked for guarantees that regime troops will be able to enter all localities unhindered.

Yet Deraa is where the uprising first broke out in 2011, so while the predominantly Sunni Arab population hopes to prevent full-scale hostilities, they also seem determined to avoid a return to the status quo ante. They would rather obtain some degree of independence from the central government—a goal apparently reinforced by their interactions with the Druze. Despite their historical tensions with that sect, thousands of Sunni Arab refugees from the Houran region have found shelter in the Druze capital of Suwayda and smaller towns over the past decade. There, they discovered firsthand how the Druze managed to prevent the regime from controlling their affairs, maintaining a large military presence in their mountainous domain, or forcing their youths to serve in the Syrian army. Although split by rivalries and contradictory agendas, the Druze leadership held their forces out of the rebellion while creating an array of effective self-defense units that fended off both Hourani provocations from Deraa and Islamic State incursions from the surrounding desert areas (the latter of which have resumed in recent weeks). They also foiled Iran and Hezbollah’s attempts to strike roots around Suwayda.

Local leaders in Deraa want to reproduce this model in their own communities: they will swear allegiance to the regime, but only so long as it does not get too intrusive. They do not want heavy-handed officials running their province from afar; they do not want to fight for Assad on distant frontlines; and they want Russia to guarantee these concessions. In other words, they want to avoid the fate of Quneitra province, where the regime has forced its will on local authorities and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has mobilized local militias to establish provocative positions on strategic hills facing Israel.

Assad appears to find this vision unacceptable, however. The Russians may indeed be half-heartedly encouraging him toward dialogue, but at this point he seems to favor what he believes would be a fairly easy reconquest of Deraa province in its entirety.

## CONCLUSION

**W**hen striving to subdue civilian populations, the Syrian army tends to rely on ranged firepower rather than infantry assaults. If these indiscriminate tactics are applied in Deraa, the death toll could be very steep. Such a campaign is also bound to send a fresh wave of refugees in all directions—to the borders of Israel and Jordan as well as to Druze strongholds in the mountains.

In addition, these dynamics would pave the way for Iran to bolster its local proxies (e.g., “Battalion 313”) and entice unemployed youths to enlist by offering them salaries—perhaps including some of the 7,000 former rebels who used to receive assistance from the Israel Defense Forces. This could in turn give the IRGC and Hezbollah an opportunity to increase their own presence in Deraa’s western countryside facing the Golan, a longstanding Israeli redline.

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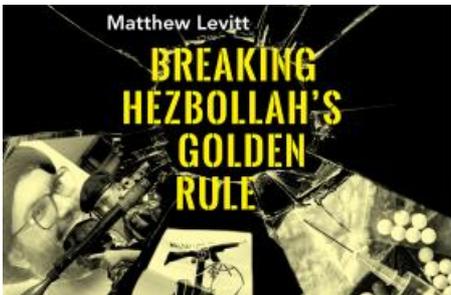
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