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Future of the Daraa Settlement after the Collapse of the Russia- sponsored Agreement

Unit for Political Studies

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In early September, after a siege that lasted 75 days, a committee representing the people of the Daraa al-balad neighbourhood reached an agreement with the Syrian regime forces, in which the regime pledged to stop bombing the city, end the siege, and settle the security situation for the residents who participated in the revolution. The Russians participated in the negotiations as the mediator and guarantor of the agreement, but the agreement lasted a mere three days. The regime quickly resumed bombing the city in what appeared to be a persistent strategy to occupy Daraa and impose more conditions on the residents and opposition fighters, some of whom had demanded safe passage to Jordan or Turkey. However, the two countries have expressed reluctance to receive new refugees.

Background to the Latest Crisis

The Daraa governorate, including the Daraa al-Balad area, which is at the heart of the current escalation, is of great importance due to its proximity to the borders of Jordan and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. It also enjoys a symbolic position as the cradle of the revolution that erupted against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in early 2011. The cities and towns of the governorate revolting against the regime, like the rest of the Syrian regions, were subjected to military campaigns that resulted in widespread destruction and casualties. With the transformation of the uprising from peaceful to armed resistance that fragmented into hundreds of factions, large parts of the province fell into the hands of the opposition factions during the early years of the revolution. But the Russian military intervention in 2015 severely tilted the balance of power in favour of the regime. Daraa was one of the four de-escalation zones that Moscow has succeeded in enforcing since May 2017 to suspend the conflict in Syria according to the Astana agreements, which included Turkey, Iran and Russia.

The Russian plan was not limited to suspending the conflict but included steps to isolate the areas under the regime's control from each other in preparation for controlling them one by one. Given that the region is adjacent to the borders with Israel and Jordan, it has captured more US attention than the other de-escalation zones. Moscow has taken advantage of this to convince Washington of its vision to establish its own security arrangements that distance forces linked to Iran from the border. On the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, on 7 July 2017, Moscow reached an agreement with Washington, the details of which were elaborated, with the participation of Jordan, in a subsequent agreement on 11 November 2017, which allowed for a cessation of fighting in the region between the regime forces and the opposition factions.⁽¹⁾

The de-escalation zones were nothing but a Russian attempt to single out the opposition areas and dissolve them one after the other. In June 2018, the regime dismantled a Russian-backed military campaign to control the de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria, which includes Daraa, or impose surrender agreements on the opposition factions present there, after succeeding in doing the same in

1 "Russia Proves that the De-Escalation Zones were a Means to a Military End," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies <https://bit.ly/3yN5J0G>.

the two de-escalation zones in Eastern Ghouta and the northern Homs countryside. But the region's proximity to Jordan and Israel pushed again towards a new US-Russian-Jordanian consensus, which was not without Israeli influence.

Indications of the Russian-US agreement on Daraa appeared at the summit held on 16 July 2018 in Helsinki between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. In the press conference he held with Trump after the summit, Putin touched on the military escalation carried out by the regime forces since mid-June 2018, with direct Russian support in southern and southwestern Syria, which enabled it to regain control over the areas adjacent to the borders with Jordan and Israel, linking it to Israel's security. Putin contended that the goal of the campaign was to "provide security for the State of Israel", based on the 1974 agreement that separated the Syrian and Israeli forces in the aftermath of the October 1973 war.

Putin argued that achieving this would be a step towards establishing a "permanent peace" between the two countries in compliance with relevant Security Council resolutions, in particular Resolution 338.⁽²⁾ It was clear that the Trump administration does not oppose this Russian effort, as President Trump stressed that the United States would not allow Iran to benefit from the "successful campaign" carried out by his country against ISIS in Syria, by enabling it to establish itself near the border with Israel. He stressed that his country is ready to work jointly with Russia and Israel to ensure Israel's security. Trump was clear in saying that "our (US and Russian) militaries, actually, have gotten along probably better than our political leaders for years. But our militaries do get along very well, and they do coordinate in Syria and other places."⁽³⁾ The two leaders' focus on Israeli security and interests in the Syrian context was praised by Israel; as was clear a statement by then Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.⁽⁴⁾

Trump and Putin's consensus on Syria was clearly visible on the ground, as the large-scale attack launched by the Syrian regime forces with heavy Russian air cover, starting on 19 June 2018, against the south and southwest of the country did not meet any US opposition, and led to the expulsion of the opposition forces. Washington had facilitated this outcome by informing the Syrian opposition, in mid-June 2018, that they should not expect any intervention on their behalf in the south if the regime forces attacked. This is despite the Trump administration warning the Assad regime in May 2018 that it will take "firm and appropriate measures" to preserve the de-escalation agreement in southern Syria, specifically in the Daraa area on the Jordanian border.⁽⁵⁾

A Russian-Israeli agreement, with the approval and presence of the United States, to distance Iran and its militias about eighty kilometres from the borders of Israel has also come to light. In return, Assad

² "Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference," The White House, 16/7/2018, accessed on 6/9/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jLZxG>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Henry Meyer, "Putin Says He Agreed with Trump to Secure Syria Border with Israel," Bloomberg, 16/7/2018, accessed on 24/7/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/p143tW>.

⁵ David Ignatius, "Is Trump handing Putin a victory in Syria?" *The Washington Post*, 18/7/2018, accessed on 24/7/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/e5UG5v>.

is allowed to regain control of the southern region on the border with Jordan, and the southwestern region on the border with Israel.⁽⁶⁾ Trump alluded to this agreement when he said, “President Putin also is helping Israel. And we both spoke with Bibi Netanyahu, and they would like to do certain things with respect to Syria having to do with the safety of Israel. So in that respect, we absolutely would like to work in order to help Israel, and Israel will be working with us. So both countries would work jointly.” He added, “creating safety for Israel is something that both President Putin and I would like to see very much.”⁽⁷⁾ As a result, the United States announced that it had abandoned its support for the southern factions, stopped providing them with any aid, and on top of that closed the operations room it had established in Jordan to support the Syrian opposition in the south known as the Military Operations Center (MOC). With Russian-Jordanian participation, a ceasefire agreement included the opposition forces handing over their “military hardware” followed by the rest of their weapons and the evacuation of fighters and civilians who rejected the deal to Idlib.⁽⁸⁾

Renewed Fighting

The 2018 agreement did not lead to the normalization of the situation between the regime and the people of Daraa, as Daraa residents boycotted the presidential elections held by the regime in May 2021.⁽⁹⁾ On 25 June, the regime forces launched a military offensive and imposed a siege against Daraa al-Balad after the opposition refused to hand over light weapons on the premise that it was in violation of the 2018 agreement. The deal was supposed to allow people to keep their individual weapons, and permit the opposition fighters who wished to join the Fifth Corps, which Russia formed specifically to include former opposition fighters in the reconciliation areas.⁽¹⁰⁾

In early September 2021, that is, after nearly two months of military escalation on the besieged neighbourhoods of Daraa al-Balad, the two sides reached an agreement under Russian auspices. The deal stipulated flying the Russian and Syrian flags over public institutions in the city, establishing four security points for regime forces in Daraa al-Balad, deploying forces from the Russian military police in the city’s neighbourhoods, and the opposition who wish to remain in Daraa handing over their weapons. Meanwhile those who refused to surrender weapons would be exiled to opposition areas in the northwest.⁽¹¹⁾ The agreement lasted only three days starting from 1 September, as the regime forces resumed their intensive bombardment of the city when the opposition’s negotiation committee rejected new conditions requiring them to hand over all

6 Ibid.

7 “Remarks by President Trump and President Putin.”

8 Kareem Khadder, Natalie Gallón & Ben Westcott, “Syrian Government Reaches Reconciliation Deal with Rebels in Nawa,” *CNN*, 19/7/2018, accessed on 3/9/2021, at: <https://cnn.it/3tcvSok>.

9 Jalal Bakour, “Daraa: Calls to Boycott the Elections... and the Regime Threatens Employees with Dismissal”, *The New Arab*, 25/5/2021, accessed on 3/9/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2WW75ZQ>.

10 “Russian Military Police Enter Daraa to Implement the Agreement between its Clans and the Syrian Regime.” *Al Jazeera Net*, 1/9/2021, accessed on 3/9/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2YpiX7f>.

11 Ibid.

individual light weapons in the city and allowing the regime to establish 9 checkpoints instead of 4. This was in addition to home searches and extraditions or expulsions of wanted persons in contravention of the agreement.

Questions Surrounding the Russian Role in Daraa

Contrary to what has become custom, Russia did not intervene militarily in the interest of the regime to resolve the Daraa al-Balad crisis. Rather, it preferred to play the role of a “mediator” between the regime and the opposition, despite ultimately seeking to enable the regime to fully regain control over the region. However, Russian non-interference proved a lifeline for the opposition factions, who, in July, managed to seize control of several regime checkpoints around Daraa al-Balad, and captured some regime officials. The current Russian position is due to the desire to keep the Iranian militias participating in the attack on Daraa away from the border area with Jordan and Israel, in accordance with its understandings with Tel Aviv. Russia wants to monopolize influence in this sensitive region, within the framework of its conception of a buffer zone along the borders with Israel and Jordan,⁽¹²⁾ in which the Syrian regime’s control would be under the auspices of the Russian military supervising the activity of the reconciled opposition,⁽¹³⁾ and not the Iran and Hezbollah militias.

It seems that Moscow wants to avoid causing a major displacement crisis in this region to Jordan, which is currently seeking to rehabilitate the Assad regime internationally, resuming economic relations and repatriation efforts in the hope of embarking on a reconstruction process with Arab and international participation. These endeavours were evident in the recent visits by King Abdullah to Washington and Moscow, with Syria a major focus of the topics discussed. These efforts succeeded in achieving a breakthrough in the US position, which exempted Jordan and Lebanon from the US Caesar Act and allowed the transfer of gas and electricity from Egypt and Jordan to Lebanon through Syrian territory.⁽¹⁴⁾

It also seems clear that Russia wishes to build on its recent consensus with Washington regarding the extension of humanitarian aid into northwest Syria through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. This can only be achieved if Russia continues to cooperate to prevent a new humanitarian catastrophe in Syria.⁽¹⁵⁾ Finally, the absence of extremist Islamic factions or those flying the flags of Al-Qaeda or ISIS affiliates in Daraa makes it difficult for Russia to justify any large-scale military intervention in the interest of the regime, as it has done in other regions.

¹² Rami Al-Qalyubi, “Russian Deliberation in Syrian Daraa: Conflict of Interests with Allies,” *The New Arab*, 6/8/2021, accessed on 3/9/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2Yr1POU>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ William Christou, “US Gives Green Light for Lebanon to Import Electricity, Gas through Syria,” *The New Arab*, 19/8/2021, accessed on 3/9/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3jJ0bjk>.

¹⁵ Michelle Nichols, “U.S. Strikes Deal with Russia to Continue U.N. Syria Aid Access,” *Reuters*, 9/7/2021, accessed on 3/9/2021 at: <https://reut.rs/2WJWu4p>.



Conclusion

The settlement agreement in Daraa al-Balad lasted but a few days. The regime and its allies, the Iranian militias participating with it in the siege of the city, as is habit, turned to military force to resolve the situation. There is clear revenge fuelled sentiment towards the city that sparked the revolution, and a desire to punish its people by forcing them to accept humiliating conditions or be expelled. Russia is continuing its efforts to reach a settlement that benefits its general strategy in Syria, including preventing Iranian militias being stationed on the borders with Jordan and Israel, not wanting to see the region turn into an Iranian-Israeli war arena. But the absence of a clear US position on what is happening in Daraa encourages Iran and its militias to continue to pursue a security solution to the crisis, and to try to find a foothold on the border with Israel that gives them tools to apply pressure and additional regional power.