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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Implications of Darayya Exiting the Syrian Conflict Equation

Policy Analysis Unit | September 2016

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Introduction

After more than four years of unrelenting assaults by the Assad regime and its allies against Darayya in Rif Damascus, and despite the heroic endurance of the armed opposition fighters in the city, the regime has imposed a settlement on the city's revolutionary forces, following a tight siege and air and ground bombardment. The settlement led to the complete withdrawal of the Free Army and the civilian population from the city.

Darayya: a Story of Freedom and Revolution

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Darayya was at the forefront of peaceful protest.¹ A group of young people had led emerging civilian protests in the city, and went on to become a model for disciplined civilian action to be emulated.² Two revolutionary coordinating committees emerged in Darayya, subsequently merging to form the Local Council of Darayya City. This merger coincided with the shift to the period of armed opposition following regime violations against Darayya residents.

¹ Darayya lies some 8 km to the southwest of Damascus and borders the Mezza district, one of the main suburbs of the capital and site of the Mezza military airbase and a branch of air force intelligence. It is the largest city in the western Ghouta, with an area of 53 km² and a population of 255,000 before the revolution. Darayya's people worked in agriculture and then business, and before the revolution, Darayya was an economic center in Rif Damascus.

Darayya was part of the civilian protest against the regime, albeit in soft fashion, from the early part of Bashar Al-Assad's rule, with the emergence in 2003 of what was known then as the Darayya Youth, who adopted non-violent principles and peaceful struggle. This group organized various civic activities in the city, culminating in the first demonstration of its kind seen in Syria during the rule of Al-Assad, father and son, demanding reform and an end to corruption. This pushed the regime to imprison group members for more than two years, since the protest, even if it did not include the full spectrum of civil society, was unprecedented at the time and also signaled the start of the split between the authorities and the Syrian countryside, whose alliance was forged during the Baathist coup in 1963.

² During the early peaceful demonstrations, protest in Darayya embodied an idealist nationalism in terms of respect for public institutions, including the army, and for the territorial integrity of the state. Activists from Darayya gave water and flowers to soldiers during protests, and the city's churches rang their bells when martyrs were buried.

The city witnessed several incursions by regime forces who committed many massacres, most notoriously on August 25, 2012 when dozens of people, mostly women and children, were killed. After that, armed revolutionary groups made up of local people took control of the city to stop the regime from repeating its incursions. The regime besieged the city and periodically tried to invade.

The military and civilian activity in the city had the following features:

- The leading role of the Local Council of Darayya City in running the city in terms of media, politics, administration, and services. This role took shape as a result of considerable coordination between civil and military activists in the city, and the Council became a key member of the regional Rif Damascus Council. It was responsible for managing the interests of some 5,000 civilians (the remaining population of Darayya). It also incorporated the Local Council of Kafr Sousa, the neighboring Damascus district, taking on the affairs of the families of fighters from that neighborhood who were living in Darayya, as well as more than 50 displaced families from Kafr Sousa living in Darayya.
- Operational consistency between the Local Council and local military units, and an insistence on defending the city. Revenge attacks of a sectarian or geographic nature outside the city limits were prevented, even though many areas close to the city supported the regime and were in firing range of city forces.
- The city maintained its place within a national framework and the idea of an international conflict received no political or social support inside Darayya.
- Contact and coordination with other revolutionary groups in general terms, as a result of the Saad bin Abi Waqqas Brigade and the Al-Miqdad bin Amr Brigade being under the umbrella of the Afnad al-Sham Islamic Union, while the Martyrs of Islam Brigade signed the convention of the southern front on February 14, 2014.
- The Martyrs of Islam Brigade was formally linked with the Military Operation Coordination (MOC) command room in Amman, Jordan, but was completely independent of it in terms of decision-making, planning, and operations. In addition, the Martyrs of Islam Brigade received no financial or military aid from MOC.

Russian Intervention

Since the Russian military intervention, Darayya has borne the brunt of the regime's military campaigns in southern Syria. The Syrian air force intensified its attacks on the city; according to the Darayya local council, more than 9,000 barrel bombs were dropped on the city up to August 23, 2016, causing hundreds of civilian deaths and massive destruction. Nevertheless, the regime was only able to advance into the city in recent months thanks to Russian air and intelligence support. In early 2016, the regime was able to cut the vital geographic link between Darayya and the neighboring town of Muadamiyah, which struck a truce with the regime. That link ensured the minimum requirements for the existence and survival of Darayya.

The regime tried unsuccessfully to have Darayya excluded from the ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia and the United States at the end of February 2016, ahead of the launch of the Geneva 3 talks, on the grounds that the Nusra Front were present in the city. However, the regime did succeed in preventing humanitarian relief supplies reaching the city, and the UN was only able to send one humanitarian convoy to Darayya during the ceasefire, after the city had already been besieged for three years and ten months.

With the faltering of the Geneva 3 talks and the gradual breakdown of the ceasefire, the attacks on Darayya intensified. The territory controlled by the revolutionaries of Darayya shrank to only 1.5 km square. Most of the city's remaining agricultural land—the sole remaining source of livelihood for the civilians still left—was destroyed when the regime resorted to bombing the city with burning napalm. This led to pressure on the resistance groups to negotiate a solution to ensure a safe exit for the civilian population.

The Local Council of Darayya City, the Martyrs of Islam Brigade, and the Al-Miqdad bin Amr Brigade formed a committee to negotiate with a regime delegation. The regime demanded a complete surrender, including the raising of the white flag and the giving up of all weapons, resolution of the status of dissidents, and the removal of fighters to Idlib. The revolutionaries rejected the regime's demands and insisted on an appropriate safe-exit agreement for civilians and fighters which did not treat them differently. They refused to hand over personal weapons, but were prepared to give up heavy and medium weapons. The outcome was an agreement whereby fighters who refused to stand down were given safe passage to Idlib while civilians were transported to the Horjelah and Qudsaya areas in Rif Damascus. The agreement also included provisions relating to the release of women and children, release of information on the fate of prisoners, and the

return of the bodies of martyrs, and covered fighters from Darayya and their families located in Muadamiyat Al-Sham, provisions which were recently implemented. The regime demanded that implementation of the agreement be monitored by the Syrian Red Crescent in an apparent attempt to forestall any international desire to oversee implementation. The Local Council of Darayya City requested oversight of the agreement from UN special envoy for the Syria crisis Staffan de Mistura, but the UN was content to merely send an observation mission.

The End of Darayya's Legend

The strategic location of Darayya was not the only motivation for the regime to end the rebellion of the city at any cost. Indeed, the high price paid by the regime to make the city submit and the difficulties it posed to Assad's elite forces and their allies, in the context of increasing setbacks for the regime over the last two years, especially in northern Syria, meant that to end the example of Darayya would be a vital morale booster for the regime and its allies, and a blow to the morale of the revolution, for which Darayya had become an icon. Calm on the fronts in southern Syria, in-fighting in the Eastern Ghouta, and the holding of local truces in the Darayya region helped the regime achieve its aims.

The regime immediately started exploiting the end of the conflict in Darayya to tighten the conditions of the local truces that it had agreed with rebel areas, moving to bring them under complete control. The regime proposed the ending of the truce with Muadamiya and the imposition of a settlement modelled on the Darayya agreement but with harsher conditions, threatening to target the city if this was not accepted. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov referenced this when he stated that the Hamimim center "has notified us that there are other regions in Syria interested in continuing this experiment making use of mediation by the Russia Federation." Moreover, the regime escalated its military campaigns against the Al-Waer neighborhood to the west of Homs in an effort to make it submit and accept regime conditions.

The regime's insistence that fighters from Darayya go to Idlib is evidence of its strong desire to end pockets of revolution around the capital and to push them away to the north, thereby achieving the regime's vision of adopting the option of "useful Syria" (comprised of already controlled territories) as a way out of the impasse caused by its loss of a large proportion of the territory it once controlled.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the recent retreats of regime forces from various regions (southern Rif Aleppo and northern Rif Hama in particular), the regime is aiming to finish off the opposition-held pockets around Damascus, with the eastern Ghouta set to be the most difficult target in the coming stage. Therefore, it is to be expected that armed groups in many areas will work to reduce pressure on the besieged regions experiencing a regime escalation, in the context of a policy of population transfer from pockets of opposition within the borders of what has become known as “useful Syria”. Thus, the opposition armed groups will seek to undermine the regime strategy that strives for redrawing the demography of those regions.