

# PEACEWORKS



## Local Cross-line Coordination in Syria

By Natasha Hall, Benjamin Smith, and Thomas McGee



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**MEDIATION,  
NEGOTIATION  
& DIALOGUE**

## ABOUT THE REPORT

Based on four case studies, this report examines local coordination across Syria's lines of conflict. Jointly supported by USIP's Inclusive Societies and Syria programs, the report attempts to fill a gap in the literature by assessing the potential and limitations for local dynamics to resolve the larger conflict and build peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Cover photo:** A member of the Menbij Military Council gestures at a car in Menbij, in northern Syria, on December 29, 2018. (Photo by Rodi Said/Reuters)

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# Summary



Throughout the conflict in Syria, freedom of movement often has been restricted or in some cases impossible during periods of prolonged fighting. Yet the movement of people and goods, including vital foodstuffs, medicines, equipment, and fuel, has been more feasible in certain areas than others. In many cases, local arrangements, historical circumstances, and key actors have been able to facilitate trade and movement across the lines of conflict. In some instances, these arrangements appear to have played a critical part in how the Syrian government has regained control of these areas.

Four particular areas of Syria—Madiq Castle, Northern Homs, Da’el, and Menbij—present notable examples of cross-line cooperation. These cases highlight how even robust local cooperative arrangements have remained vulnerable to the larger conflict dynamics, with three of the four cases ultimately returning to Syrian government control.

The four case studies also present cautionary tales about the problems of relying solely on local actors or track 1 negotiations. By examining the evolution of the local conflict dynamics of these areas, especially since 2015, this report adduces the lessons that these cross-line arrangements might have for reconciliation, peacebuilding, and postconflict justice in Syria as a whole.

The case studies also examine the important role of historical connections and pivotal public figures to understand the factors that have enabled trade and movement across lines of conflict to continue. In some instances, the economic usefulness of a particular crossing point encouraged local combatants to keep trade moving; in others, a prominent local figure acted as a mediator to resolve points of tension between the government and opposition, or even with outside third-party actors. Lessons gleaned from these case studies can potentially also provide guidance to those involved in cease-fire or reconciliation negotiations to help protect civilians who have been caught in the crossfire.





Two men—one on foot, one on a motorcycle—travel along a bombed-out street in Aleppo, in northwest Syria, in January 2019. (Photo by Jorge Villalba/iStock)

# Introduction

**Throughout the conflict, the existing ethnic, religious, economic, and political divides in Syrian society have both deepened and widened. Hopes for bridging these divides, which have been exacerbated by political rhetoric and outside influence and money, are diminishing.**

The eight-year-long conflict in Syria, brutal in its intensity and confounding in its complexity, has evolved from a popular uprising to a multifaceted war involving government security forces loyal to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, pro-government and opposition militias, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, the Islamic State and groups associated with al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, and international actors such as the United States, Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Throughout the conflict, the existing ethnic, religious, economic, and political divides in Syrian society have both deepened and widened. Hopes for bridging these divides, which have been exacerbated by political rhetoric and outside influence and money, are diminishing.

In a stated effort to mitigate the bloodshed, Iran, Russia, and Turkey signed a de-escalation agreement for Syria in the Kazakh capital, Astana, on May 5, 2017. The deal aimed to reduce violence between rebel groups and forces fighting on behalf of the Syrian government by establishing four de-escalation zones for a six-month period.<sup>1</sup> The three outside signatories were to act as guarantors for the deal. However, in light of its currently successful position, supported by the aid of steadfast allies, the Syrian government had little motivation to comply with the strictures of internationally imposed compromises or cease-fires. In early 2018, the agreement broke down, with

Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs, Dar'a, and Quneitra all falling to government forces in quick succession.

Before these events, certain local mechanisms in cross-line areas allowed for the trade of various goods and the movement of civilians across different spheres of influence. The presence of these mechanisms had a direct effect on the nature of government seizure of formerly opposition-held areas. This study attempts to explore the origins of these arrangements, identify the main actors involved, and examine the ways in which these coordination mechanisms affected so-called reconciliation deals and postreconciliation justice.


To delve into these themes, this report presents four in-depth case studies. In these locations, actors who typically were at odds or were actively fighting on the battlefield came together to formulate procedures that allowed for the relatively unobstructed movement of goods and persons across different areas of control. The case studies in this report were chosen according to areas of control and geographical breadth: Madiq Castle, Northern Homs, Da'el, and Menbij. The case studies all presented situations of relatively stable cross-line arrangements from representative geographic ranges. Though several actors have been at play in every scenario presented, the Syrian government remains the constant actor throughout all case studies, albeit in a more peripheral role in Menbij. In Madiq Castle (and its nearby sister town As-Suqaylabiyah), the historical social bonds of the area's residents were able to surmount sectarian rhetoric for much of the conflict, though rising levels of violence and recent events destroyed that uneasy peace. In Northern Homs, local dynamics between government and opposition forces, and between armed actors and civil society, were critical to the shape of the negotiations—and the role of Russian mediation in the area's handover to government control is also worth studying in greater detail. In Da'el, an informal crossing between the government-held town of Kherbet Ghazala and formerly opposition-controlled Da'el facilitated commerce of the region's agricultural produce, but the

formalization of security controls in the area had notable and not always beneficial effects on the local population. Finally, even as the town of Menbij weathered regular territorial clashes by myriad actors and a period of occupation by the Islamic State, a series of locally coordinated arrangements helped secure the movement of civilians and supplies across lines of control.

This report analyzes the transformation of Syria's conflict by showing how cross-line coordination mechanisms, active at least intermittently since 2012, morphed during a pivotal period in the Syrian conflict. The case studies focus on the key stakeholders, their means of communication, and how these coordination mechanisms adapted to the conflict. Conflict update sections reveal whether these lines of communication benefited communities in opposition-held areas during periods of intense conflict or after reconciliation deals. The analysis concludes by assessing key takeaways from the case studies and potential areas of opportunity for peacebuilding actors and negotiators. The research for the report involved a mixed methodology approach conducted from February 2018 to March 2019. Desk research from English, Arabic, and Kurdish open sources informed the research questions, and more than thirty stakeholders were identified based on their direct influence and/or involvement in the cross-line arrangements discussed. The authors then conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with these stakeholders from February to July 2018. These interviews included questions on persons and goods allowed to pass through these crossings, taxes and bribes levied on the users of the crossing, security incidents and other challenges, motivations for using the crossing and benefits to each side, negotiation dynamics, and actors involved in facilitating these arrangements.<sup>2</sup>

To follow up on how communities were faring after government forces entered the case study area, researchers conducted a final update in June 2019. These conflict updates take the previous cross-line dynamics into consideration while assessing more recent waves of negotiations and violence.

# Madiq Castle: Can Strong Social Bonds Overcome Overarching Conflict Dynamics?



Qalaat al-Madiq, or Madiq Castle, is a town with a medieval fortress in northwestern Syria, located forty-five kilometers northeast of Hama city on the Al-Ghab plain on the eastern bank of the Orontes River. About five kilometers directly to the south of Madiq Castle is the district center, As-Suqaylabiyah. The inhabitants of Madiq Castle town are predominantly Sunni Muslims; its sister town, As-Suqaylabiyah, is predominantly Christian with an Alawi minority.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, both towns have had strong commercial and social relations that have persisted despite sectarian differences. Yet the violence in the area, as well as the presence of external state actors, undermined local ties and deepened the ongoing conflict.

The area became a flash point in 2013 when government forces turned the third-century al-Madiq citadel into a military garrison. After months of fighting, the town came under a truce, which allowed for the limited movement of goods and civilians between lines of armed actor control in Madiq Castle town. Until May 2019, opposition groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Nasr controlled Madiq Castle and the government controlled As-Suqaylabiyah town. No more than four hundred meters of road separated the last opposition-held checkpoint and the first government-held checkpoint.

After opposition forces took Idlib city in 2015, the crossing at Madiq Castle grew in importance as a cross-line point for the transport of goods between government- and opposition-controlled areas. Although local

religious divisions could have made the Madiq Castle–As-Suqaylabiyah area a persistent hot spot, the front lines remained relatively stable. Occasionally, snipers carried out operations, or shelled targeted areas near the Syrian military’s Jurin camp or the Nahl checkpoint, but even with growing sectarian rhetoric the crossing remained relatively open until August 2018. Opposition factions protected As-Suqaylabiyah traders, and several clinics and shops in Madiq Castle were run by Christians who came back and forth from As-Suqaylabiyah town, according to an Alawi woman still living in Madiq Castle.

Products from northern Syrian farmers, such as peaches, apricots, cherries, pomegranates, wheat, and other foodstuffs from Turkey, were regularly able to reach government-held areas in the northern Hama countryside, giving a boost to local farmers. Some vegetables also were transported from government areas to the north. Perhaps most importantly, wheat farmers in Hama and Idlib were able to sell their annual harvest to the highest bidder, which usually was the government, according to an analyst with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Even though fuel and building materials were not allowed through the Madiq Castle crossing, one local council member stated, “Nothing is actually banned. Not with money. The drivers just pay more.” Typically, he said, fuel coming from government-held areas (and areas once under the control of the Islamic State) passed through nearby Morek, a major trading hub.





## Map 1. Madiq Castle and Surrounding Areas in Northwestern Syria

Map by Benjamin Smith

Civilians also crossed the lines in either direction. State employees periodically collected their salaries from Hama city, and students crossed to get to the university in government-controlled Hama. However, many people were arrested at these checkpoints over the years. One trader said he depended on drivers on the government side to transport his goods since he is wanted for military service. Even with this uncertainty, the same merchant said that, during 2017, more than ten thousand people from Madiq Castle and the surrounding Idlib countryside traveled regularly to As-Suqaylabiyah.

International humanitarian organizations used the Madiq Castle transit point for humanitarian convoys carrying food and medical supplies and moving the injured.

Renamed “Point Zero,” the crossing also served as a gathering area to transport those forcibly displaced from opposition areas taken by the Syrian military in southern Syria to the northwest. After the major government offensive on Eastern Ghouta in March 2018 and reconciliation deals in Northern Homs and parts of Dar’a, tens of thousands more people were transferred through the Madiq Castle crossing, according to local authorities. The same crossing was used to transfer Shia residents of the besieged towns of Foua and Kefraya to areas controlled by the Syrian government.

Transaction costs at the checkpoints naturally varied based on the items transported. To the great financial benefit of those manning the checkpoints on the



government-held side, smugglers used this route to transfer those wanted by the government into opposition areas. The progovernment National Defense Forces (NDF) charged a standard amount of around 800,000 Syrian pounds (\$1,600) for these transactions.<sup>4</sup> The fee for smuggling well-known activist or opposition figures was higher. The official cost of customs fees varied according to the weight and type of goods. On the opposition side, this payment was taken by Ahrar al-Sham or Jaysh al-Nasr. Opposition sources claimed that the limited profits from the crossing supported local administrative offices and not the armed groups. Other sources claimed that the armed opposition groups took all the profits for themselves. That said, interviewees generally concurred that the opposition had fewer checkpoints and lower levels of extortion at the crossing than the government side.

Abu Mohammed, a merchant in Hama who works at the Madiq Castle crossing, pointed out that “it is necessary to pay royalties [i.e., bribes] to the five or six government checkpoints located at As-Suqaylabiyah and Tal Salhab.” According to sources familiar with the trade, the amount depended on the person manning the checkpoint that day. However, even after paying for transportation costs and various official and unofficial taxes, the goods were still less expensive than Turkish and foreign goods in general. The benefits to both sides of keeping the crossing open outweighed the negatives; hence, for years the traffic continued relatively unabated.

## CROSS-LINE DYNAMICS

The main players involved in coordinating the crossing on the government side in As-Suqaylabiyah were the NDF, the elite 4th Armored Division of the Syrian Army (considered one of the units closest to the inner circle in Damascus and headed by President Assad’s brother, Maher al-Assad), and the Russians. In Madiq Castle town, a range of civilian actors played a role in the negotiations over the crossing, but the most important individual was Hamada al-Dayea, also referred to as “Abu William.” He had been mayor (mukhtar) of Madiq

Castle before the war and was respected by both opposition and government forces. According to the head of the Madiq local council, Abu William became head of the Communications or Dialogue Committee (as it was called in opposition-held areas) and the Reconciliation Committee (as it was called by the government). He was the only individual allowed to speak to the government side on behalf of the opposition.

Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Nasr also had considerable influence on decision making at the crossing, as they were responsible for providing protection for those who came into the town. The local council and the *shura* council were engaged in negotiations behind the scenes and issued public statements if there was a disturbance.<sup>5</sup> However, direct contact with the government or the Russians on any issue went through Abu William. Any other opposition figure having direct contact with the government other than Abu William could suffer considerable consequences as an accused collaborator.

Until August 2018, the only disruptions to local trade were brief minor disturbances. For example, in April 2017, in an effort to mitigate extortion on the government side, the armed opposition attempted to close the crossing, but almost immediately rescinded the decision as food prices in the north skyrocketed.<sup>6</sup> Still, key informants believed that the ongoing communication mitigated the extortion on the government side. On September 20, 2017, war planes unexpectedly attacked Madiq Castle town, hitting the market in the center of the city and a residential neighborhood. The leader of the Syria Civil Defense first responder team in Madiq Castle said that the consecutive strikes killed a total of eighteen people, including seven children. The attacks, which caused many town residents to flee to nearby areas and some to the camps along the border, closed the cross-line area for a month.

Given the area’s strong cross-line social bonds, observers have long pointed to the frozen front lines at Madiq Castle as a potential model for future peacebuilding. Walid Hassani, a Jaysh al-Nasr military leader stated

**Government and opposition forces facilitated the movement of commercial convoys and buses to and from the Madiq Castle crossing. However, as the conflict continued, the limitations of the coordination mechanisms and strong social bonds on shaping current conflict dynamics came to light.**

that the two towns have been able to maintain strong social and economic bonds because of their geographic proximity.<sup>7</sup> Abdu Youssef, a trader from Madiq Castle, said, “We are like brothers with the people of As-Suqaylabiyah. To this day, if there is trouble or shelling from the government side, the priest or a religious man in As-Suqaylabiyah will intervene to ease the tension.” These social bonds were strengthened over the years by commercial relations, especially for foodstuffs like vegetables and fruits. Under unofficial agreements, government and opposition forces facilitated the movement of commercial convoys and buses to and from the crossing. However, as the conflict continued, the limitations of the coordination mechanisms and strong social bonds on shaping current conflict dynamics came to light.

The fate of the nearby Abu Dali crossing has been significant for Madiq Castle. Just 35 kilometers from Madiq Castle, Abu Dali, which was controlled by pro-government tribes, was the last point separating government-controlled regions of Hama and opposition areas in southeast Idlib. The route was a major trading artery for smugglers and merchants from the cities of Hama and Idlib until late 2017. Like other crossings, it continued to operate because it benefited both sides and had a local middleman, parliament member Ahmed Darwish, who could help coordinate with the government. The crossing remained open until October 2017, when Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—the militant group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, which served as al-Qaeda’s local affiliate in Syria—took over Abu Dali village and intense battles ensued.<sup>8</sup> The government eventually regained control of the area, and HTS was pushed back, but the crossing never reopened. Even an influential government figure could not stop conflict dynamics from keeping such a profitable crossing open. Madiq Castle kept the influence of HTS out

and continued to serve as a buffer between government-held areas and more extreme elements in Idlib. However, Abu Dali served as a warning for what could happen if the government no longer found it useful to preserve the front lines.

Indeed, challenges to the relatively stable status quo immediately surfaced as the de-escalation agreement expired in early 2018. On February 24, 2018, a Russian delegation told the Reconciliation Committee that thirteen towns in Hama—including Madiq Castle, Kafr Nabutha, Mount Shahshbo, and Bab al-Taqa—had to allow Russian forces to enter and establish observation points. The Russian negotiators threatened to do so peacefully or by force, and set March 10 as the deadline to decide, according to the Madiq Castle local council.

The Russian threats elicited an immediate response. Within days, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Nasr affirmed that they would not allow Russian or government forces to enter the area.<sup>9</sup> Shura and local councils followed suit with statements concurring with the armed factions, and adding that they hoped to remain under Turkish supervision (as stipulated in the de-escalation zones agreement of May 2017).<sup>10</sup> In a unified statement, the local councils beseeched the regime and the international community to stop the escalation, since many of the hospitals in the area had been destroyed and the injured would not have anywhere to go if there was an incursion.<sup>11</sup>

Civilians began leaving the area before the deadline. Many of them already had been displaced from other parts of the country. It appears as though the Russian negotiators were just testing the waters—they backed down from the hard deadline, likely because of ongoing offensives in Eastern Ghouta rather than any opposition efforts. However, trusted sources reported that the Russian delegation began shifting their strategy by



Medics in Madiq Castle city, in Hama Province, move an injured man who was evacuated from the Wadi Barada valley, near Damascus, on January 30, 2017, after an agreement was reached between rebel and government forces. (Photo by Ammar Abdullah/Reuters)

secretly reaching out to individual opposition figures in an attempt to “buy off” key actors from opposition-held Northern Hama. When this approach did not succeed, the government tried alternate tactics, arresting family members of prominent opposition figures in As-Suqaylabiyah. Some were released and told to deliver threats to their family members.

## CONFLICT UPDATES

The bonds between these Christian and Sunni towns have been lauded as a paragon of prewar interfaith relations in Syria. However, the people of Madiq Castle are under no such illusions. The Syrian government always allowed the crossing to operate when it served its own interests. Forces loyal to the government were able to extort enough money from the checkpoints to make a good living, and civilians could access produce from the north, as well as some specialty goods from

Turkey. In a war-ravaged economy, the government needed commercial movement. Trade has been critical for buoying up the sinking Syrian pound, which by 2016 had lost nine-tenths of its prewar value.<sup>12</sup> Even though civilians have been able to intervene over minor issues, the strong social bonds that civilians on both sides prize were unlikely to be able to halt the government’s ambitions to take back the rest of Hama.

As if to illustrate this point, in a dramatic turn of events, Abu William, the trusted local intermediary and former mukhtar of Madiq Castle, was arrested by Ahrar al-Sham and detained for a month in the fall of 2018 for colluding with the regime. Allegedly, he was receiving a cut of the proceeds from the sale of the wheat harvest to government-held areas. Following his release, he fled to government-controlled Hama, and dialogue between the regime and the opposition has come to a standstill.



**“There is no trust left between the regime and opposition sides, so we can’t negotiate now. The Russians and the Turks are in control of the process, and the Russians can make the regime do whatever they want. Maybe in the future the two sides can begin talking again, but for now it’s impossible.”**

In August 2018, the Madiq Castle crossing was closed and all trade relocated to nearby Morek. There is speculation as to why the regime closed the crossing. Locals initially assumed the simplest explanation was that most trade had already moved to the Morek crossing, which was more conveniently located along the M5 highway. However, there also were rumors that HTS paid the Syrian military nearly 80 million pounds (\$150,000) to close the Madiq Castle crossing so that they could benefit from the taxes and extortion that comes with having control over the main cross-line conduit in the area.<sup>13</sup> Either way, without Abu William, there was no means to directly negotiate with the regime anymore.

With no dependable negotiator and no active crossing, contact between the two sides halted. According to local council members, their fate was completely in the hands of the Turkish and Russian negotiators. After the presidents of Turkey and Russia signed an agreement on September 17, 2018, to create demilitarized zones in northwest Syria, Turkish forces set up numerous observation posts, including one in Jabal Shahshabo on the Al-Ghab Plain, which straddles the opposition holding line. Local leaders in Madiq Castle placed much of their faith in the future stability of the area on Turkish support. However, the HTS offensive in early 2019, which succeeded in taking most opposition-held territory in the northwest (except for Madiq Castle and Turkish-controlled areas) without any Turkish intervention, dampened these hopes. Even though the local council insisted that Turkish patrols in the area would save them from a government offensive, Russian and Syrian air strikes hit areas around the observation posts with little regard for the Turkish presence.

In the meantime, the Turks and the Russians negotiated for the future of this area without local input. When asked

if it would be better to reopen the dialogue between the government and opposition sides, one civil society member in Madiq Castle said, “There is no trust left between the regime and opposition sides, so we can’t negotiate now. The Russians and the Turks are in control of the process, and the Russians can make the regime do whatever they want. Maybe in the future the two sides can begin talking again, but for now it’s impossible.”

In April 2019, government and Russian forces stepped up attacks on the northwest, hitting several medical centers, including a hospital in Madiq Castle, putting the facility out of service. Tens of thousands of people from northern Hama and southern Idlib fled to internally displaced persons camps straddling the Turkish border. According to the local council, people were warned of an impending incursion. As a result, many pieces of equipment such as tractors and water pumps were relocated. In May, regime forces entered the already bombarded, emptied town without negotiations or settlements. After years of coordination, residents fled—expecting never to return to their homeland, which was now firmly in the hands of government forces.

If negotiations can come to such an abrupt halt after years of relative stability and cross-line coordination in As-Suqaylabiyah, it does not seem likely that a fair settlement—one that does not pose a danger to residents—can be reached anywhere in Syria without the assistance of international observers. However, given the historic ties between these cross-line areas, the lack of local civil society involvement in such negotiations may be detrimental to future peacebuilding efforts. The residents of Madiq Castle and the surrounding towns serve as reminders of the strong bonds that still link Syrians together, as well as what could be lost.

# Northern Homs: An Uneasy Truce for Civil Society and Armed Groups

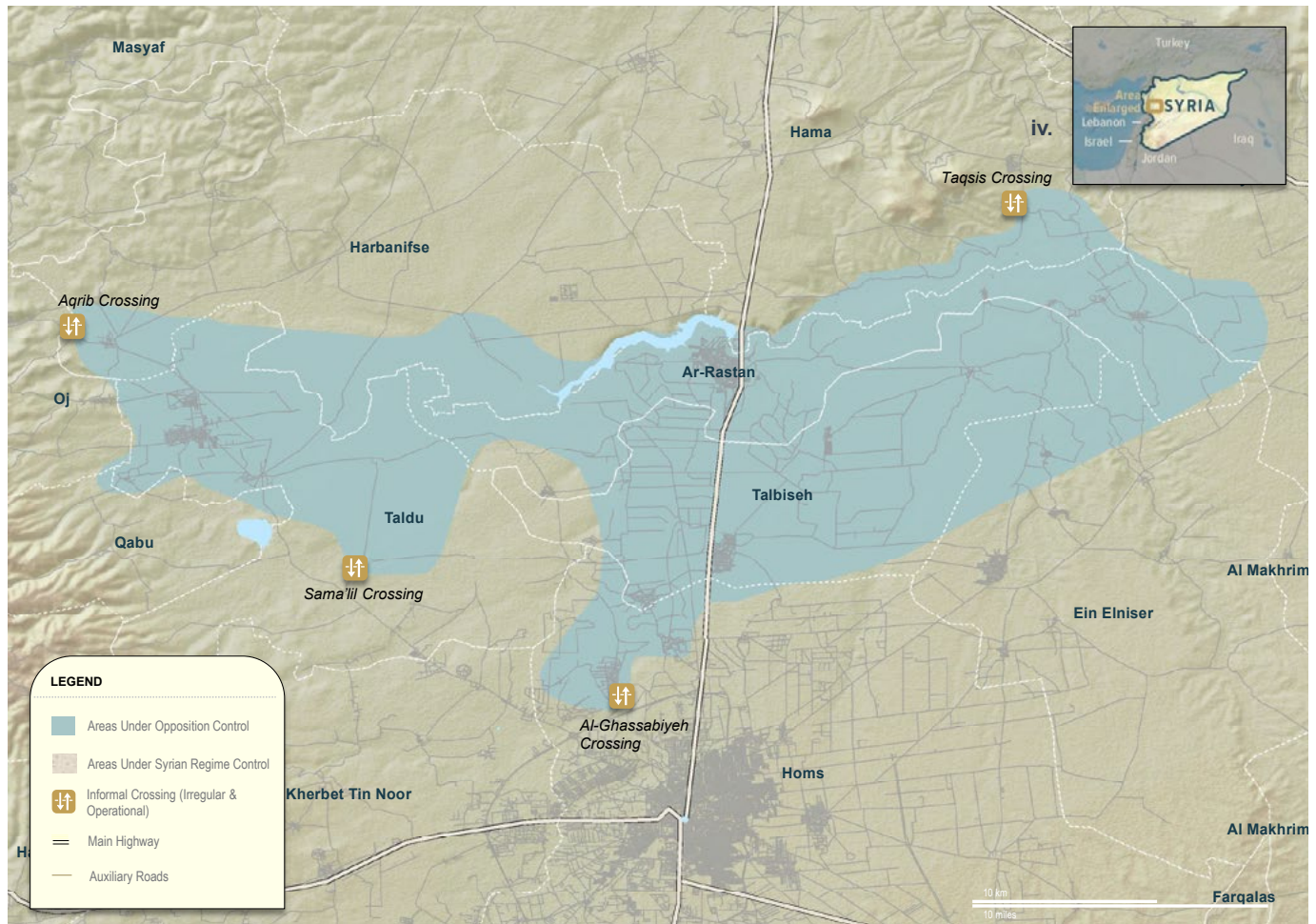


Located just five kilometers north of Homs city, the Northern Homs enclave was once a strategic stretch of territory for the opposition in central Syria. Situated on the M5 highway between Damascus and Aleppo, the area had been a major blockage point for the government, hindering access between the country's capital and other commercial hubs across Syria for more than six years. By early 2018, it was estimated that 235,000 people were living in the Northern Homs enclave, concentrated mostly in the towns of Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh, and Kafer Laha.<sup>14</sup> The vast majority of the enclave's inhabitants are Sunni Muslim, many of whom are of Turkmen origin. Before the war, some Alawite, Isma'ili, and Christian communities lived along the periphery of the Al-Houleh region, as well as in Talbiseh town and surrounding villages.

Prior to the government takeover of the enclave during April and May 2018, the Syrian military's six-year-long campaign to cordon off towns and reclaim the M5 highway left Northern Homs with little access to electricity, water, fuel, and basic food commodities. Government forces also had besieged opposition-held areas in nearby Homs city and Al-Waer. After Homs city surrendered in 2014, fierce fighting broke out in Northern Homs as a result of increased pressure on Al-Waer to accede to a government-proposed surrender agreement. Government forces gradually coerced several key towns around Northern Homs into informal local truce agreements in 2016.<sup>15</sup> These agreements allowed government forces to focus on other battles.

Notably, the local truces and the May 2017 de-escalation cease-fire agreement also allowed for increased cooperation between government and opposition entities. On the government side, Homs mayor Talal Barazi was an advocate for such agreements and played a key role in their implementation.<sup>16</sup> As a result, a number of ad hoc crossings were established along front lines adjacent to strategic towns and supply routes.<sup>17</sup> Even though relations between government- and opposition-held areas in Northern Homs would never be completely sanguine, an unusual level of cooperation would come to exist around access to the area's local markets.

From 2015 to early 2018, the primary point of cross-line cooperation in Northern Homs was Al-Ghassabiyeh, situated next to Al-Dar al-Kabireh town just two kilometers away from Homs city. This vital lifeline became officially operational in July 2016, controlled on the opposition side by Ahrar al-Sham and on the government side by the NDF. In addition to allowing limited civilian movement, Ahrar al-Sham permitted local traders to send vehicles into government-held areas to purchase fuel and other essential commodities from markets on the outskirts of Homs city.<sup>18</sup> According to a number of civilian and military sources, Ahrar al-Sham did not tax vehicles coming into or out of opposition-held areas. The NDF imposed taxes on vehicles entering government-held areas according to the type of commodity being transported. However, a number of sources



## Map 2. Northern Homs Enclave in Central Syria

Map by Benjamin Smith

claimed that taxes were never fixed on the government side and had a tendency to fluctuate weekly or even daily depending on local market supply and demand. Ordinarily, taxes levied on items like household gas or diesel for heating were higher at around a million Syrian pounds (about \$2,000) per five-ton truck on average, while fresh meat or medical items could cost anywhere between 150,000 and 250,000 pounds per truck, according to a Ghanto local council member.

The Syrian government periodically blocked access to the market, but it regularly allowed hundreds of local traders to carry out weekly purchases in Northern Homs through Al-Ghassabiyeh crossing. Individuals with government clearances were able to profit from

the crossing; those who feared arrest because they were wanted by the government or had dissidents within their immediate family were less successful at running cross-line businesses. According to interviewees, public servants and their families (as many as 10 to 15 percent of mostly male headed households) were still being paid a monthly salary by the Syrian government in Northern Homs even while it was under opposition control. Those who maintained links to the government and freedom of movement were able to profit both politically and financially from cross-line trade. However, the real profits were made by NDF units extorting what they could on Al-Ghassabiyeh crossing.



Coordination at the crossing depended heavily on armed actors who had the power to disrupt security in the area. Under the terms of an agreement in May 2016, Ahrar al-Sham and other groups agreed to refrain from targeting the Masyaf Road, the main supply route to government-held Latakia and Tartus. The government, along with its Iranian allies, agreed to cease its offensive aimed at splitting the enclave in two. A locally formed negotiations committee also called for a corridor to allow civilians to regularly enter government-held areas to purchase basic food commodities in a nearby open market. The first official crossing in and out of Northern Homs was established along a small road connecting Talbiseh to Al-Ashrafiyeh village.<sup>19</sup> The agreement stipulated that public servants living inside opposition-held areas would be allowed to collect salaries in government-held Homs city. Students would be allowed to regularly attend classes and sit for exams.

This tenuous agreement came close to collapsing on several occasions in its first few months owing to the interference of Liwa al-Ridha, an Iranian- and Hezbollah-supported militia.<sup>20</sup> According to a journalist from Talbiseh in Northern Homs, the group had been operational since mid-2015 in villages in the eastern Homs countryside, close to the Northern Homs enclave. On more than one occasion, the Syrian government and its local paramilitary NDF were unable to make the group comply with locally brokered truces and cease-fires.<sup>21</sup> Given the group's proximity to Al-Ghassabiyeh crossing, its activity was especially problematic. However, all sides eventually agreed on conditions to keep the arrangement going. The government was able to resume movement on nearby supply roads, and the opposition was allowed greater access to the marketplace in Northern Homs, relieving financial pressure on the local population.

## CROSS-LINE DYNAMICS

Few of the various key influencers involved in negotiations with the Syrian government and its affiliated militias over the years actually have origins in the Northern

Homs countryside. Before the siege of Homs city during 2013 and 2014, Ar-Rastan—the de facto capital of the Northern Homs enclave—was under the control of battalions of the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) and local security forces. However, between February and May 2014, several evacuation deals from the old city of Homs to the Homs countryside, combined with the growing presence of Al-Nusra Front elements affiliated with al-Qaeda in eastern Homs, altered power dynamics in Ar-Rastan town and the rest of the enclave. A large contingent of Salafist Islamists from the Al-Haq Brigades with roots in Homs city fled to Ar-Rastan as government forces began to drive opposition fighters from Homs city and retake supply routes. By mid-2014, all remaining elements from within the Al-Haq Brigades and other Homs-based battalions had been displaced to Ar-Rastan from the old city of Homs. From that point, Ar-Rastan quickly came under the authority of Ahrar al-Sham, which incorporated many fighters from the displaced Al-Haq Brigades and other armed groups into its ranks during 2014—making it by far the most influential presence in the area and a strong ally of the Al-Nusra Front. As it grew in military strength, the group established a jointly run Supreme Sharia Court in Ar-Rastan, garnering support from both the Al-Nusra Front and some FSA-affiliated groups in Ar-Rastan. According to a mediator for Syria's Tomorrow Movement, an opposition party based in Cairo, most of the court's constituents and administration consisted of prominent Ahrar al-Sham-affiliated clerics and scholars.

In early 2015, Northern Homs' first negotiations committee was established to engage with the Syrian government. The committee was a small body, composed of two judges from the Supreme Court of Ar-Rastan and a few mediators from Talbiseh and Ter Maalah. According to an Ar-Rastan local council administrator, most of the committee participants maintained more cordial relations with Ahrar al-Sham than with any other armed group. Yet this committee was instrumental in negotiating with the regime and its armed forces to establish cross-line trade conduits, managing to bring

in much-needed food and fuel to the opposition-held enclave. Key interlocutors from the Al-Haq Brigades helped the negotiations committee broker the first deal to open crossings. These same influencers—particularly Kinan and Labib al-Nahas, two brothers from Homs city—would become an integral part of Ahrar al-Sham’s political leadership. The al-Nahas brothers also mediated surrender agreements across many besieged pockets of Syria, including the so-called Four Towns Agreement and agreements for Aleppo city and Al-Waer, all of which involved the controversial forced evacuation of tens of thousands of civilians from opposition-held areas.

Alongside the instrumental role played by judicial actors and armed groups in brokering local truces and other cease-fire agreements, civil society began to look for a way to exert influence over cross-line arrangements. According to a Homs negotiations committee member, the community’s tolerance of Ahrar al-Sham and affiliated Islamist groups had begun to wear thin following noninclusive negotiations to surrender the Al-Waer district in April 2017 to the government. By then, Ahrar al-Sham had effectively surrendered Madaya, Zabadani, Aleppo city, Al-Waer, and Daraya to the government, leaving thousands of civilians vulnerable to government reprisals.

On the government side, officers from Russia’s Reconciliation Center, based at Hmeimin Air Base, began to take an interest in negotiations starting in mid-2017 and reportedly met with delegations from the Northern Homs’ Negotiations Committee several times at the Dar al-Kabireh crossing. When the Russian-brokered de-escalation agreement went into effect on October 4, 2017, civil society actors including technocrats, local council members, and humanitarian workers immediately requested that Ahrar al-Sham and its allies allow other parties to liaise with Russia. In the words of one local media activist from Talbiseh,

We as the community here in Northern Homs are tired of armed groups occupying such a vast space within so-called reconciliation or negotiations committees. The wider community needs a realistic transitional phase to occur, not just another military takeover as other communities have suffered. We need a better alternative, rather than lending our fate to being overrun by local NDF or forcibly removed from our homes.

Amid negotiations to broker a cease-fire in line with the de-escalation agreement in July 2017, a bitter power struggle ensued between civil society activists and those affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham. A high-ranking spokesman in the newly established negotiations committee from the Al-Houleh area mentioned that the Ahrar al-Sham leadership and other Islamist groups were eager to place the de-escalation deal under the auspices of Turkish protection: “They were convinced that Turkey could save us from eventual surrender and that the Turkish military would set up observation posts around Northern Homs in cooperation with the Russians.” However, the Russians were not on board with the proposal, and neither was Turkey, according to opposition figure Abdel Salam al-Najib, a key interlocutor for the Tomorrow Movement and a businessman from Talbiseh. Al-Najib quickly brought several of his own constituents from Talbiseh into the committee, along with the endorsement of Jaysh al-Tawhid, an FSA-affiliated coalition considered to be the strongest opponent to Ahrar al-Sham in Northern Homs. By early August 2017, the Tomorrow Movement was able to cut a deal with the Russians to enforce and implement the de-escalation agreement, according to a mediator.

From August 2017 to early 2018, leaders of local councils and notables across the enclave were integrated into a revamped, more inclusive thirty-two-member negotiations committee. For the first time, they were able to raise issues about the enclave’s fate with the Russians, according to one member of the committee. Much of the community threw its weight behind the committee and viewed the initiative as a positive step. Those interviewed from various segments of the community



Policemen check identification cards at a checkpoint in the town of Ar-Rastan, in the Northern Homs enclave of western Syria, in July 2018. (Photo by Hassan Ammar/AP)

supported Russia as a pivotal mediator. However, the Russians' inability to engage with the regime on the outstanding detainees' file—a list of more than seven thousand abducted persons from the Homs area—soon diminished the community's confidence in the Russians' effectiveness.<sup>22</sup> According to a member of the Talbiseh local council, which had been actively compiling the list since August 2017, "The Russians have repeatedly promised that the government will release several batches of prisoners throughout the cease-fire period." That promise, however, was never delivered. According to another member from the Taldu local council, the community had placed the detainees' file at the forefront of negotiations, making it a priority for any future reconciliation. Yet the Syrian government has been reluctant to engage or even comment on the issue, and a Tomorrow Movement mediator stated that the government has denied that such a list even exists.

## CONFLICT UPDATES

As conflict levels soared in Northern Homs in April 2018, preliminary negotiations with the Russian Center for Reconciliation began at Dar al-Kabireh. From the outset, the Russians made it clear that hard-liners—including Ahrar al-Sham, HTS, and Tahrir al-Watan—would not be welcome in the reconciliation discussions. Mediators from the Tomorrow Movement and the Wa'ad Party (led by Firas Tlass) played a key peripheral coordination role owing to their direct line of contact with the Russian Center for Reconciliation. According to numerous sources from the previous negotiations committee, the Tomorrow Movement convinced Jaysh al-Tawhid to engage with the Russians and to exclude hard-line groups like Ahrar al-Sham from the negotiations.

Almost immediately, the newly formed Reconciliation Committee, mostly composed of Jaysh al-Tawhid





A Syrian flag flutters at a military checkpoint in Al-Khaldieh area in Homs city in September 2018. (Photo by Marko Djurica/Reuters)

commanders and affiliates, agreed on behalf of Northern Homs to proposals put forward by the Russian delegation. They effectively lowered the ceiling of demands by other representatives within the committee. In response, community-led demonstrations flared up, denouncing the outcomes of negotiations and accusing Jaysh al-Tawhid of ignoring the detainees' file and collaborating with Russia. Other factions, such as the newly formed 4th Legion (composed of Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Homs, and the Al-Haq Brigade) under the umbrella of the opposition, Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, rejected the agreement outright and denounced Jaysh al-Tawhid as collaborators. Eventually, the tide of defeat in the enclave and around the country was overwhelming, and many in Northern Homs were preparing to depart to northwest Syria.

On May 2, 2018, the conflict between the armed opposition and the government in Northern Homs effectively came to an end.<sup>23</sup> The speed with which the opposition in Northern Homs ceded control of the enclave mostly can be attributed to the intense conflict that had just taken place in Eastern Ghouta during the first quarter of 2018. As per the initial surrender agreement, the vast majority of armed opposition groups in Northern Homs capitulated to Russian demands to hand over heavy weaponry and evacuate to the north. According to most estimates, some 2,500 fighters agreed to evacuate during a five-day period, accompanied by a further thirty-three thousand civilians, most of whom were fighters' family members, local council members, and other opposition activists. Similar to other areas that had surrendered to the government, the vast majority of the population opted not to leave. In addition to some 150,000 civilians, approximately 2,500 opposition fighters from

Jaysh al-Tawhid and other FSA-affiliated groups, mostly in the Talbiseh area, remained behind and were given a six-month deadline to settle their security status and reconcile with the Syrian government.

During the initial post-takeover period, reconciled Jaysh al-Tawhid fighters were granted a large autonomous space to continue providing security for communities by the Russians, especially in the key towns of Talbiseh and Ar-Rastan along the M5 highway. Russian military police and Jaysh al-Tawhid began to conduct regular joint patrols on the newly reopened highway. Eventually, reconciled fighters were integrated into formal command structures linked to Russia and the Syrian Army, most notably the Russian-created Fifth Corps and the Tiger Forces. Jaysh al-Tawhid fighters within these structures have since been deployed to numerous front lines across Syria, including to Dar'a, the eastern desert areas, and more recently to the northwest.

As the six-month deadline for reconciliation passed in October 2018, the Russian military abruptly began to withdraw its presence from Northern Homs. Russian military police subsequently dismantled checkpoints on the M5 highway, handing over much of the area, with the exception of Talbiseh, to the Syrian Army and its paramilitaries. Following repeated calls by communities for the Russians to remain in Northern Homs, the Russian Center for Reconciliation promised the negotiations committee that the Russians would maintain a presence in Talbiseh and conduct regular patrols around the enclave. Military police have since established a recruiting office in Talbiseh, reportedly taking on two thousand cadets for training, many of whom have origins in Jaysh al-Tawhid and other FSA-affiliated groups from Northern Homs.

The lack of a regular Russian presence and the layer of protection it provided to Northern Homs has been felt by many in early 2019. As the Russian military police withdrew from many key towns on the M5, the government's Air Force Intelligence Directorate and military security immediately scaled up their presence in key towns along the M5 highway and the Orontes River. Widespread arrest campaigns of so-called dissidents have become a regular occurrence since August 2018, targeting many deemed to have links with Islamist opposition groups and the Muslim Brotherhood. In tandem with arrests at checkpoints, a reported four hundred military-aged males that attempted to reconcile with the government and settle their status before the six-month deadline have been arrested or forcibly conscripted, stoking tensions between the government and the community. Strikingly, several high-ranking commanders from Jaysh al-Tawhid, which had been incorporated into the Fifth Corps, also were detained by Air Force Intelligence in the Talbiseh area during February and March 2019.

Arrests, detentions, and government-backed forced conscription campaigns have been on the rise in other so-called reconciled areas across Syria in 2019, most notably in towns around rural Damascus that went through an almost identical reconciliation process to Northern Homs. As demonstrated in the next section, communities across Dar'a are experiencing similar breakdowns of reconciliation agreements, with arbitrary arrests and detentions on the rise. The government's flagrant violations of provisions within reconciliation agreements and a lack of an honest and reliable third-party guarantor has reinforced fears of these deals in opposition-held areas.

# Kherbet Ghazala and Da'el: A Reluctant Truce



Dar'a Province in southwestern Syria is one of the country's breadbaskets, with extensive agricultural fields that have long produced various foodstuffs to be sold to Damascus and other parts of the country. With around six hundred thousand inhabitants, the formerly opposition-held areas of the province were not densely populated.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the vast majority of the goods produced continued to be sold to Damascus throughout the conflict.

Kherbet Ghazala, a town in Dar'a Province, lies roughly seventeen kilometers northeast of Dar'a city adjacent to Da'el in the west and Western Ghariyah to the east. It is strategically situated on the main highway between Damascus and Amman, the only paved route direct from Damascus to Jordan (a major trading partner). Opposition forces expelled Syrian government forces from Kherbet Ghazala in 2013, but they were pushed back following intense clashes between FSA and Syrian government forces. Although the government retook the town in May 2013, Kherbet Ghazala continued to be surrounded by opposition territory to the west, east, and south. The area witnessed occasional clashes, but the front lines remained frozen for years.

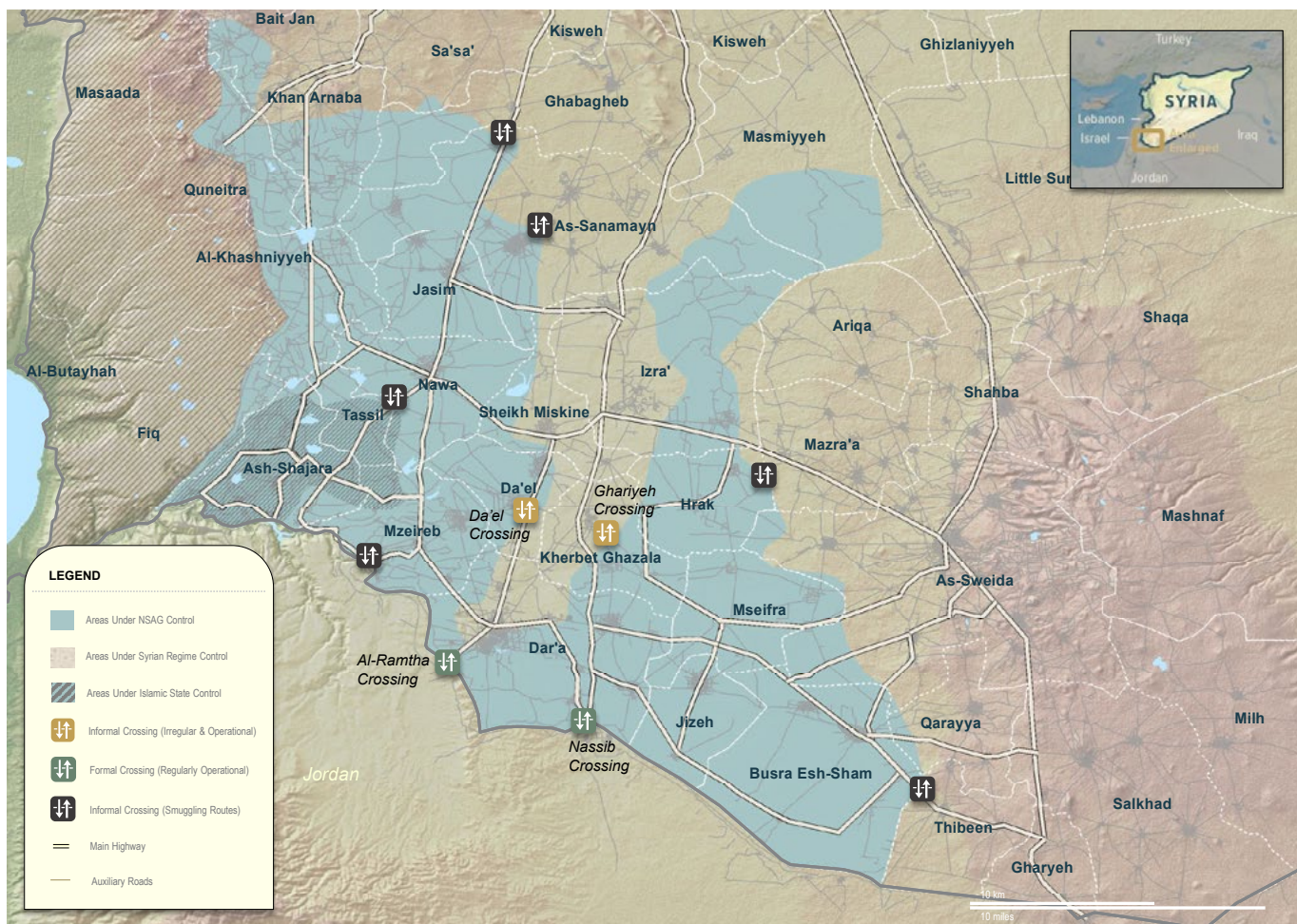
After failing to recover international crossings with Jordan, the government began setting up internal crossings between the provinces of Damascus and Dar'a.<sup>25</sup> From 2013 on, the regime established several crossings in Dar'a. Some served as humanitarian crossings, some allowed the movement of certain goods, and others primarily were for the movement of persons. The crossing between Da'el and Kherbet Ghazala, which was open from 2013 to 2016, is a

particularly useful subject for study, both for its strategic location along the Damascus-Dar'a highway and for its status as a crossing point for both goods and persons.

At the time, the Abu Kasser Road linked the city of Da'el with the international highway (the Damascus-Dar'a highway), and it was considered the main road between the western countryside of Dar'a and Syrian government-held areas. Abu Kasser had once been a simple dirt road, but as residents in the opposition-held areas began to rely on it more heavily for transportation and trade, it was paved. Vegetables, dairy products, and meat were exported to government-held areas along this road, while food and clothing was sold in opposition-held areas. In 2016, however, clashes in the area around Da'el reignited. In late January 2016, Syrian government forces took control of the city of Sheikh Miskine, north of Da'el, destroying large swaths of the town and forcibly displacing many of its inhabitants. Forces then advanced toward the town of Atman, south of Da'el, and took control of it in February. The Syrian government then announced a reconciliation agreement in the town of Abtaa, just north of Da'el. Fearful that government forces were closing in on the area, some Da'el residents began to call for a reconciliation deal to avoid suffering the fate of Sheikh Miskine.

By October 2016, the deteriorating security situation led to the closure of the Da'el crossing. Following a series of clashes around an abandoned military barracks, the unofficial crossing between government- and opposition-held areas was sealed off for months. By April 2017, the clashes stopped. Even in the midst





**Map 3. Kherbet Ghazala, Da'el, and Surrounding Areas in Southwestern Syria**

Map by Benjamin Smith

of lingering tensions, the crossing almost immediately reopened, because the distant As-Sweida crossing for commercial movement had become too expensive for traders and civilians to use, according to a humanitarian worker from Da'el.

In May 2017, the government unilaterally cleared out and paved nearly four acres of land around the Da'el crossing on Abu Kasser Road and installed prefabricated rooms to serve as customs clearance services. At this makeshift customs station, the authorities imposed royalties on goods entering government-held Dar'a from Da'el and from Western Ghariyah. According to some activists, high taxes and bribes were one of the ways

that the Syrian military could ensure that their soldiers were properly compensated for securing the area.

Without an effective and trusted negotiation mechanism, Shabab al-Sunna, the military faction that controlled opposition-held Western Ghariyah to the east of Kherbet Ghazala, responded dramatically to the government-imposed taxes. In May 2017, it declared the crossing area a military zone and targeted its southern checkpoint with a barrage of rocket-propelled grenades. Shabab al-Sunna threatened that any trader who paid the government-imposed customs fees would be “traitors to the blood of the martyrs.”<sup>26</sup> Liwa al-Karama, the faction responsible for running the Da'el



checkpoints, also briefly shelled the crossing. The Dar al 'Adel court in opposition-held areas ruled that the crossing should remain closed until traders were no longer forced to pay the taxes, according to humanitarian workers in the area. Meat traders also launched several protests against the newly imposed customs.

Behind the scenes, armed groups and governance actors were under pressure to reopen the crossing in spite of the high taxes. The deteriorating situation negatively affected the population, who needed the products transported through the crossing. The leader of the Da'el Military Council softened his initial response, allowing humanitarian cases and students to cross into government-held areas. The opposition military factions and the provincial council met several times to discuss ways to mitigate the disruption caused by the government's excessive taxes. The military council informed traders that they could enter opposition-controlled areas without restrictions if they reduced the prices of raw materials, food, and building materials. In the end, they could not devise a way to negotiate for lower taxes without either harming the interests of farmers, traders, and civilians by closing the crossing (which would raise consumer prices), or causing more bloodshed. Within days, the crossing was reopened.<sup>27</sup>

## CROSS-LINE DYNAMICS

Since 2017 and until the June 2018 offensive on Dar'a, the Da'el crossing operated every day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Liwa al-Karama controlled the two checkpoints on the opposition side of the crossing, where its forces inspected vehicles and charged taxes. According to a member of the reconciliation committee, the 4th and 9th Divisions of the Syrian Army controlled the two checkpoints on the government side. The crossing was closed only if there were clashes in the area. Fuel, medicine, bread, flour, sugar, cattle, and most humanitarian aid were not allowed through the Da'el crossing. A local sheikh stated that the fuel regulation was so strict that drivers who had more than fifty liters of gasoline in their vehicle were required to extract the

excess fuel. The opposition, meanwhile, did not allow medicine to be traded to the government side.

According to a local trader in Da'el, while the government imposed taxes amounting to tens of thousands to millions of Syrian pounds on trucks, Liwa al-Karama charged only 2,000 to 5,000 pounds (about \$4 to \$10) per vehicle. Another trader confirmed that the government made about 10 million Syrian pounds per day (about \$19,400) on the Da'el crossing, while the opposition made about 400,000 pounds (\$780). In light of this stark disparity, the opposition's reluctant acceptance of the taxes showed its lack of leverage with the government. The subject was sensitive for residents, and humanitarian workers in the area stated that few people involved in negotiations wished to talk about the matter or reveal their names.

Key informants (including notable traders, local influencers, and armed factions) stated that the traders and the reconciliation committee were the main parties involved in cross-line coordination during this period. These players often met at the crossing on Abu Kasser Road itself or in offices in government-held areas. Although tribal influence is significant in Da'el, it is checked by the power of the merchant class in this historic trading area. The clan with the most power in negotiations in the area was the Hariri tribe, whose influence straddled government- and opposition-held areas.

Unlike the powerful tribes in the area, the reconciliation committee did not have the respect or trust of those in opposition-held areas even though they had the ear of the government. In Da'el, the reconciliation committee was widely considered an arm of the government. In the words of one influential community member who was affiliated with Liwa al-Karama, "They are employed by the regime and close to it." Some members of the negotiation delegation from Abtaa were even arrested by FSA members upon their return from discussions with the government in 2016, a portent of things to come in Da'el.<sup>28</sup> However, even



Drivers queue up for fuel at a gas station in Dar'a, in southwest Syria, in April 2019. (Photo by SANA via AP)

though members reportedly were close to the regime, they did not have any leverage over the government when exorbitant duties were imposed. Furthermore, the FSA groups in the area that controlled these trade crossings did not speak directly with government representatives. Instead, they exerted pressure on the negotiations through meetings with local influencers, traders, or the reconciliation committee. They made their interests public through military actions, such as closing the crossing, and official public statements. However, a few FSA figures eventually joined the reconciliation committee.

Another notable difference to negotiations or coordination elsewhere was the lack of outside influence. All those interviewed adamantly said that Russia and Iran were not players in the negotiations.<sup>29</sup> Cross-line coordination was an entirely local affair, where influential

traders and the reconciliation committee members relayed their own interests and occasionally the interests of the community or various military factions to Syrian military officers. This aspect of coordination in the area would prove to be an important factor during the Syrian military offensive on Dar'a in 2018 and the government occupation of Da'el.

## CONFLICT UPDATES

In June 2018, tensions soared in the south as the Russians were reportedly conferring with individual opposition members. Consequently, mistrust grew between elements of the opposition and reconciliation committee members. From late December 2017 to mid-June 2018, twenty-one members of reconciliation committees had been assassinated in Dar'a.<sup>30</sup> On June 14, the chairman of the reconciliation committee in Da'el, Hamad Riad Shahadat, was shot in the head;



Damaged houses are pictured at night in the city of Dar'a, in southwestern Syria, in February 2018. (Photo by Alaa Al-Faqir/Reuters)

Musa al-Qanbis, a reconciliation committee member from Al-Harra, also was murdered.

Recent government seizures of the Northern Homs enclave and Eastern Ghouta also increased fears of a government offensive. Those fears were not misplaced: by June 15, the government and its allies launched a major offensive to retake Dar'a and Quneitra. The battle displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians and the area's crossings were closed. Da'el was the last crossing to shut down amid clashes.

In the last week of June, the Crisis Administration, an opposition body, was formed to participate in negotiations with the Syrian government. Israel and Jordan initially appeared to be part of the negotiations, but these communications mostly related to their own interests rather than the violence affecting Syrians. At

the same time, the US administration told the rebels not to expect any additional assistance. As a result, the opposition in different parts of Dar'a were forced to negotiate with the government and their allies directly. Opposition military and civilian delegations met with Russian representatives in the opposition-controlled city of Busra al-Sham in Dar'a's eastern countryside to discuss the terms of a political settlement. A schism grew between civilian and military members when it was reported that Shabab al-Sunna, one of the groups leading the negotiations, allegedly had agreed to an initial surrender deal.<sup>31</sup> The group denied the accusation, but the civilian delegation pulled out of the ongoing negotiations in protest, citing a lack of trust in Russian intermediaries' intentions. However, talks continued, and some towns were able to secure a level of autonomy from the government.

Early on, Da'el quietly signed a reconciliation deal with the government. On June 29, progovernment forces took the city with little fighting.<sup>32</sup> Da'el's swift capitulation may have stemmed from the fact that the cross-line communications, which had been active for years, allowed the reconciliation committee and notable influencers to come together and quickly sign a deal. Unlike Da'el, holdout towns such as Tafas, Busra al-Sham, and Dar'a Balad negotiated with the regime through Russian intermediaries. These discussions eventually led to the formation of a 5th Corps of the Syrian military, composed of former opposition groups such as Shabab al-Sunna. These groups agreed to fight alongside government forces as long as the Syrian military and proregime militias did not enter their towns. In the months following the initial deal, these opposition groups continued to communicate with the Russians and the Gulf States in order to secure their interests. For example, in November 2018, when the Syrian military shelled Tafas, the FSA asked the Russians to intervene to stop the attacks, which they did. It remains to be seen if the Russians will continue to protect these areas from the regime and proregime militias; for now, it appears as though Russian intermediaries with Gulf support are the only buffer to regime violence.

Unfortunately, Da'el did not benefit from its immediate capitulation. The regime's Air Force Intelligence Directorate now has a presence in Da'el and is reportedly responsible for the frequent arrest or disappearance of activists and FSA members.<sup>33</sup> In January 2019, a man was brutally beaten and arrested by Air Force Intelligence during a dispute in a bread queue. In the widely publicized event, the intelligence agents cursed the residents of Da'el and Dar'a, and forced them to kneel in the streets.<sup>34</sup> Across Dar'a, the situation was

similar for towns that initiated reconciliation deals with the regime. After anti-Assad slogans were written on school walls in Ghabaghib, a town north of Da'el, Air Force Intelligence carried out widespread raids and arrests.<sup>35</sup> In November 2018, the number of persons arrested by the regime in the province increased compared to previous months. According to the Dar'a Martyrs Documentation Office, seventy-two people were arrested, including civilians and former rebel fighters who joined the reconciliation agreements.<sup>36</sup>

It is now clear that those who agreed to so-called reconciliation deals did not necessarily represent the interests of the people in their areas. As a result, a popular resistance has grown in the aftermath of the government takeover, conducting attacks on suspected regime collaborators, intelligence and military posts, and proregime figures. One of the prominent members of the reconciliation committee in Da'el, the FSA commander Meshur al-Kanakari, was assassinated by unknown gunmen on December 9, 2018. The popular resistance denied responsibility for the killing, but many people believe that it was a punishment for his betrayal. In February 2019, unknown assailants fired a barrage of bullets at the Air Force Intelligence office in Da'el.<sup>37</sup>

If Da'el had not had direct access to the regime through individuals such as al-Kanakari as a result of cross-line coordination, it is possible that the town would have waited to negotiate in unison with other opposition delegations. Instead, Da'el has become a cautionary tale for directly cooperating with the regime. In fact, the government's harsh behavior in the post-reconciliation period has likely helped spawn further armed resistance in the south.



# Menbij: Can Local Cross-line Arrangements Survive the Intervention of International Actors?



Menbij lies in the northeastern countryside of Aleppo Province in the northern region of Syria. Its location to the west of the Euphrates River has historically supported a rich agriculture-based economy. During the conflict, the river has acted as a natural and political boundary between the Arab-majority population of Menbij and the Kurdish-dominated region of Kobani/Ain al-Arab (respectively, the Kurdish and Arab names for the area) to the east. In Menbij, Kurds represent less than a quarter of the population, with various other minorities adding to the region's diverse ethnic-religious demographic.<sup>38</sup>

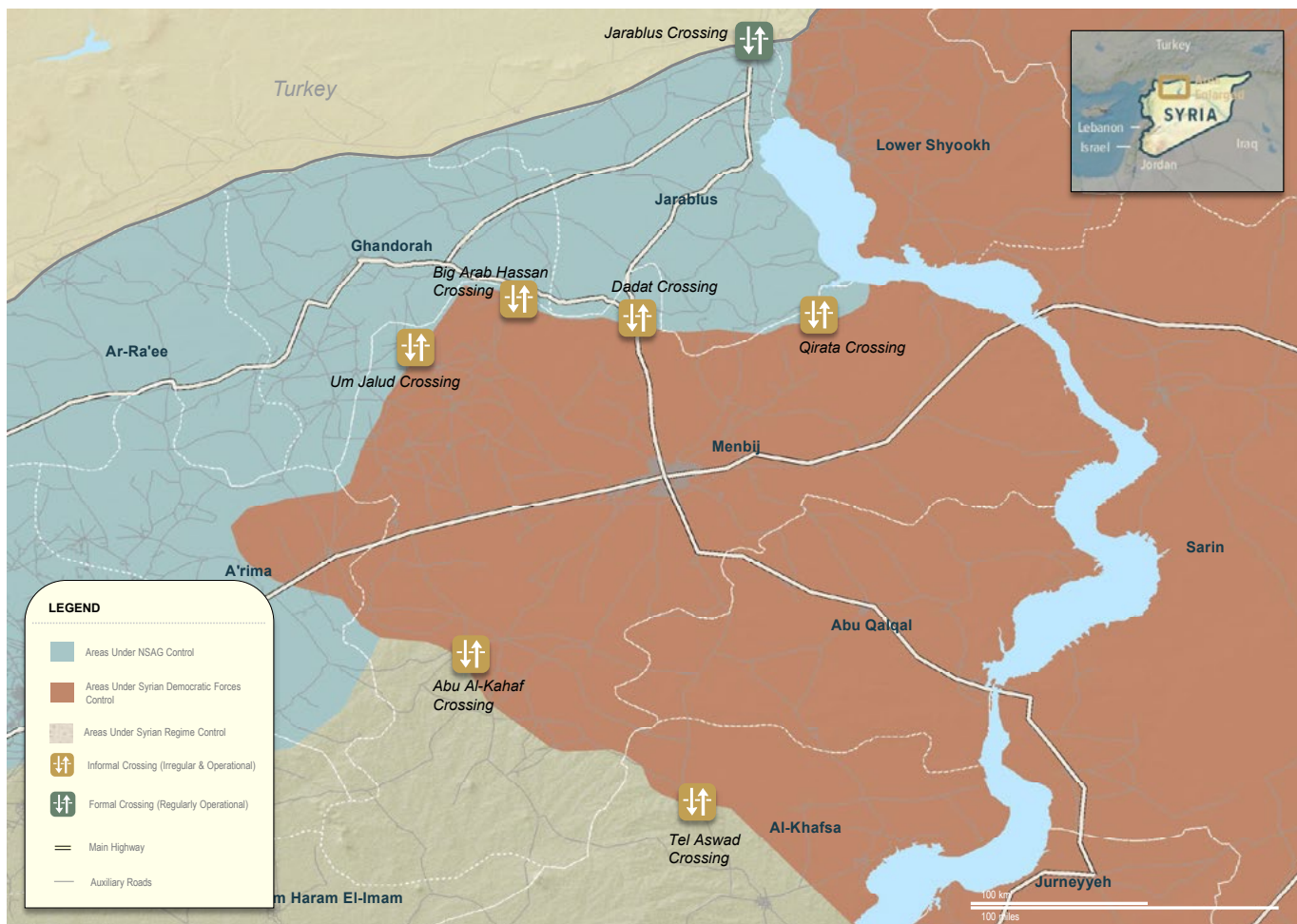
By mid-2012, Menbij was controlled by opposition forces.<sup>39</sup> In early 2014, the Islamic State assumed control over the area, consolidating its rule there for more than two years. Since the Islamic State was forced out in August 2016, the town and surrounding villages of Menbij have remained under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>40</sup>

US military air strikes targeting Islamic State positions and US Special Forces operations were instrumental in facilitating the SDF's takeover of Menbij in 2016.<sup>41</sup> The US government then played a key role in consolidating security and governance mechanisms in the area, providing strategic planning support to the Menbij Military Council. This council was formed from a coalition of several opposition groups affiliated with the Free

Syrian Army and local fighters under the banner of the American-backed SDF.<sup>42</sup> The US government also helped train Internal Security Forces recruits to patrol the area.<sup>43</sup> When the Kurdish-led Self-Administration in northern Syria formed the Menbij Military Council and its governance counterpart, the Menbij Civil Council, in April 2016, the United States supported the institutional development of these entities as well.<sup>44</sup>

Since the SDF took Menbij from the Islamic State in August 2016 and handed over administration to its civil and military councils, SDF/Kurdish control has faced numerous challenges. Ankara has frequently voiced its opposition to a Kurdish presence west of the Euphrates River.<sup>45</sup> In March 2017, the Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield was launched to oppose SDF/Kurdish control in northern Syria. Compounding the situation, much of Menbij's population is more sympathetic toward the opposition and the Syrian revolution than toward the SDF.

In early 2018, steps were taken to implement a US-Turkish agreement that focused on peaceful transition through the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the area. On March 17, the United States deployed Special Forces to the southern edge of Menbij. According to a Menbij Military Council member, this effectively separated SDF territory from the government-controlled



**Map 4. Menbij and Surrounding Areas in Northern Syria**

Map by Benjamin Smith

territory of Khafsa. The deployment coincided with an intensification of the US military presence across Menbij and pledges of increased American engagement in service delivery.

Even though influential international powers affect the larger power dynamics around these cross-line areas, the area's relative stability is mainly a result of cross-line mediation and communication. Trade and personal relations between members of armed groups and associated governance structures, along with the intervention of tribal actors, have all played key roles in the functioning (and somewhat robust) systems developed to facilitate the daily movement of civilians and supplies across lines of control.

## CROSS-LINE DYNAMICS

The cross-line dynamics taking place between SDF-controlled Menbij and territories held by both the opposition and the Syrian government are worth breaking down to study in greater detail. In three specific areas—cross-line trade and aid delivery, military and civil relations, and tribal influences in peacebuilding—the case of Menbij presents lessons in points of potential tension and cooperation.

**Cross-line Trade and Aid Delivery.** During its time under SDF control, Menbij developed into an important center for cross-line trade. With limited local production from a small number of factories in Menbij, the area relied on imports from the opposition and

government-controlled areas. Menbij became a burgeoning marketplace and hub for exchange of cross-line commodities, with the majority of traders regularly bringing commodities from both opposition- and government-controlled areas, depending on different sets of contacts to facilitate imports from each side, according to local traders. Commercial trade is largely dependent upon cross-line family relations. It is not unusual for a trader in Menbij to have brothers living in FSA- and government-controlled territories.

From FSA-controlled areas, vegetables (tomatoes and potatoes) are readily available, as well as sugar, rice, steel, cement, medication, electrical appliances, and vehicles coming from Turkey. The main route for trade and civilians to cross between opposition- and SDF-controlled territory is at Um Jlud, which has a customs lot for transferring goods from one vehicle to another. Through the ('Aoun) Dadat crossing, it is also possible for civilians to cross into FSA-controlled territory to visit acquaintances and informally bring back commodities in small quantities. Civilians are able to enter FSA-controlled areas with relative freedom, pending only a routine exit check by an SDF security officer. However, the Self-Administration authorities only allow individuals to enter or leave Menbij if they possess civil identification cards that show them to be locals of Menbij or other areas under SDF control. This requirement has been particularly problematic for many families who have long lived in Menbij but are registered to their ancestral regions elsewhere (for example, Jarablus or al-Bab). Aside from a temporary closure in late March 2017, following a decision from Turkish-backed FSA groups, these two crossings have remained operational.

According to a member of the Menbij executive council's economics committee, the SDF-affiliated civil administration of Menbij fixes customs charges for particular commodities based on weight. These taxes are understood to go toward the central budget of the Self-Administration, a point of contention for many locals in Menbij who consider it unfair that their area

does not see more benefits from the cross-line activity, according to local humanitarian workers and volunteers. In opposition-controlled areas, however, traders tend to negotiate ad hoc payment agreements with the factions manning checkpoints, often requiring them to make multiple payments and bribes across various checkpoints under FSA control. Ultimately, the arrangement is self-sustaining based on mutual needs. The Menbij civil administration receives various cross-line commodities, whereas areas under FSA control are dependent upon fuel (particularly diesel) from the SDF-controlled Self-Administration (coming especially from Rumeilan). Despite the only partial implementation of the US-Turkish deal, trade routes continue to function with little interruption.

From government-controlled areas, it is possible to buy Syrian-produced medication, fruit, vegetables, food staples, gasoline, and clothing. The main crossing for the movement of goods and people between the Syrian government and SDF-controlled territory is at Tayha.<sup>46</sup> According to one trader from Menbij, the Self-Administration and the Syrian government held secret meetings in order to maintain cross-line arrangements between SDF- and government-held areas. However, many people from Menbij who are associated with the FSA or are wanted by the government are still wary of traveling into government-controlled territory. This crossing remained operational with the sole exception of the Syrian government closing it briefly in October 2018 following clashes with the Menbij Military Council.<sup>47</sup> Trade from areas under regime control accounts for less than that from opposition areas, but the former provides an important balance to ensure that Menbij is not reliant upon a single trade route.

**Cross-line Military and Civil Relations.** Given the contested claims over the area and its proximity to both FSA and government forces, SDF-controlled Menbij has been exposed to frequent external and internal threats. The relative stability of the front lines in the area after the SDF takeover can be attributed largely to an

**Commercial trade is largely dependent upon cross-line family relations. It is not unusual for a trader in Menbij to have brothers living in Free Syrian Army- and government-controlled territories.**

arrangement coordinated by the major international actors operating in the region. The cornerstone of this coordination was the March 2017 agreement between Russia and the United States, as well as their local partners on the ground (the Syrian Army and the SDF's Menbij Military Council, respectively).<sup>48</sup> This agreement led to the deployment of Russian and Syrian troops around Arima to the west of Menbij and US military vehicles along Menbij's northern border with the opposition. These outside forces served as an effective buffer between the SDF in Menbij and opposition forces of the Turkish-backed Operation Euphrates Shield in al-Bab.<sup>49</sup>

However, local politics have also factored into the relative stability between the different areas of control. Personal relations often transcend the frequent exchange of hostile public statements between the SDF's Menbij Military Council and the FSA's Euphrates Shield groups and their Turkish backers. For example, many families living in SDF-controlled Menbij have relatives associated with FSA groups or living in areas, such as Jarablus, under FSA control. In addition, the incorporation of former FSA groups and prominent Arab FSA leaders into the Menbij Military Council meant that there was constant communication between the council and the forces involved in Euphrates Shield, particularly Liwa al-Shamal. Over the course of 2017 and early 2018, such coordination facilitated several prisoner swaps and security procedures for the return of former low-level Islamic State collaborators to areas under FSA control.<sup>50</sup> These same relations also have proved crucial to the largely peaceful implementation of the initial stages of the US-Turkish deal.

It is clear that alongside the military incorporation of FSA divisions under the title of SDF, the Kurdish-led Self-Administration has recruited and relied on prominent personalities associated with the opposition to take on public roles. The best example of this

phenomenon in Menbij is the case of Ibrahim al-Qaftan, who was head of the opposition-linked Menbij Revolutionary Council when the FSA first took control of Menbij in 2012. He served several terms as head of its successor entity, the Local Revolutionary Council in Menbij, before the Islamic State took control of the area. After the SDF captured Menbij in 2016, the Self-Administration reengaged al-Qaftan as head of the Menbij Civil Council.<sup>51</sup> He subsequently served as co-president of Menbij's executive council until late April 2018, when he left to become president of the newly formed Syria Future Party. The latter was a structure intended by the Kurdish administration to be a "more politically acceptable" vehicle to participate in negotiations on behalf of the administration.<sup>52</sup> Though many Menbij residents consider al-Qaftan to have been a mere figurehead for the administration, much of the early stability of the governance project in Menbij, with its functioning cross-line relations, was attributable to his role as a local figure with Syrian revolutionary credentials, according to an international analyst working on Syria.

**Tribal Influence in Peacebuilding.** Tribes and tribal representatives have played a constant role in local mediation. One activist in Menbij recalled how "the tribes played a particularly positive role when the SDF began its battle against the Islamic State in Menbij. Tribal figures were able to negotiate for civilians to be permitted to leave to Jarablus in order to avoid getting caught up in the conflict." In early November 2017, tribal representatives in Menbij also successfully protected locals from compulsory conscription into the SDF-affiliated Self-Defense Units, according to a member of the Al-Busultan tribe. Different leaders took different positions in their efforts to protest the introduction of the conscription policy. Sheikh Taj of the Kharaj tribe, a member of the Menbij legislative council, worked within the system to propose more acceptable alternatives,



such as some form of voluntary service, according to a member of the council. By contrast, Abu Khalaf of the large Al-Busultan tribe condemned local authorities.<sup>53</sup> Following several meetings between the Kurdish Self-Administration and the tribes in December 2017, the policy of mandatory conscription was suspended in Menbij, according to a local NGO worker. While a conscription law was later introduced for all SDF-controlled areas, tribal components managed to counter the significant negative impact of conscription on the local community at critical times of tension.

Tribal actors also have served as spoilers or guarantors for international negotiations. One example of the former is the Syrian government's mobilization of its tribal affiliates, particularly those within the Shalash family and Al-Bubana tribe, at Abu Qalqal in the south-eastern Menbij countryside to derail the negotiations between Turkey and the United States for a peaceful bilateral solution for Menbij.<sup>54</sup> As guarantors, however, tribal figures have played an important role in maintaining community relations on the ground, even as international-level negotiations over the US-Turkey "Menbij road map" stalled. The Menbij Military Council, for instance, made efforts to formally reconcile with the influential Beni Said tribe in late June 2018.<sup>55</sup>

Although Menbij locals generally considered the tribes to be effective in opposing policies that would have eroded the social fabric of communities or damaged cross-line relations, their effectiveness nonetheless has been limited. Several issues still need to be addressed to ensure a satisfactory solution from the local perspective. The local Arab population generally perceives that Kurdish authorities engage in discriminatory practices against them, such as demanding excessive security checks at checkpoints (compared to those required for Kurds from outside the area) and charging higher prices on key commodities (compared to the prices of goods in neighboring Kobani).<sup>56</sup> Additionally, individuals who are from Menbij but whose civil identification cards declare they are from areas under FSA control need

a local guarantor and must apply to secure residency. These practices have sparked resentment among the local Arab population and could present an opportunity for competing governance or military actors to exploit divisions and increase their engagement within Menbij.

## CONFLICT UPDATES

In June 2018, US and Turkish forces began to conduct coordinated military patrols around Menbij.<sup>57</sup> However, the implementation of the US-Turkey road map has been slow. Turkish sources asserted that such an agreement should provide for the full withdrawal of the Kurdish People's Protection Units from Menbij—a process that would be monitored by the two NATO countries. Some observers feared this would coincide with deteriorating relations along Menbij's southern frontier with government forces. However, one year on, little has changed in the military arrangements on the ground, and much uncertainty and speculation remains about the exact mode of implementation of the US-Turkey agreement.<sup>58</sup> The largely anticipated increase in cooperation, and even integration, between Menbij and FSA territories to the west has failed to materialize, and uncertainty over Menbij's ultimate fate still lingers. Nevertheless, the ability of local actors to maintain cross-line mobility and access has proved relatively robust.

The delicate relations the SDF maintains with the opposition have endured the unprecedented UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) delivery of a cross-line convoy of humanitarian assistance to Menbij through the Tayha crossing from government-controlled territory in March 2019.<sup>59</sup> While the Self-Administration had long declined UN attempts to send assistance across the front lines, senior leaders finally accepted the offer to help cope with the mass displacement of civilians and Islamic State fighters as the SDF made its final push against the Islamic State in Deir ez-Zor. The delivery of UN assistance to Menbij was followed by a shipment (again through the Tayha crossing) of medical infrastructure and hardware urgently needed to accommodate the large numbers of persons displaced to Al-Hol



A street vendor sells fruits and vegetables in Menbij city, in Syria's northwestern Aleppo Province, in December 2018. (Photo by Rodi Said/Reuters)

camp in Hassakeh.<sup>60</sup> Field sources suggest that the UN/SARC cross-line operations had been arranged by military and intelligence authorities at the highest levels. Civilian counterparts were largely unaware of the agreement. Trusted sources report that the 4th Armored Division of the Syrian Army was responsible for clearing the shipment. The 4th Division reportedly coordinated directly with Kurdish intelligence when the former deployed to the Menbij front line in late 2018.<sup>61</sup>

Though future arrangements for Menbij continue to be largely unclear, direct military confrontation has been avoided at the time of writing. Against the backdrop of continued declared hostility between various military actors, enduring cross-line arrangements have emerged. The key to the success of many of these arrangements appears to be the ability of SDF-linked

actors to balance cross-line relations with both the opposition and the Syrian government. Important local influencers within the local administration are prepared to negotiate and make concessions with international and local opponents to push for a solution to the Menbij dispute that avoids all-out conflict. The tribes and other local actors generally have little involvement in the ongoing negotiations between the United States and Turkey, but they continue to point out instances where higher-level social and administrative policies do not serve the people of Menbij. However, as is the nature of all of the case studies mentioned, locals generally believe that their fate and the maintenance of cross-line relations ultimately will be determined by international powers, and that they themselves will have little influence on the outcome.

# Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research



Specific personalities and relationships were integral to the functioning of certain cross-line areas. A more detailed mapping of who these figures are and how they might help or hinder future peacebuilding efforts would be a worthwhile endeavor. Even though the Syrian government's upper hand in the negotiations has made the future uncertain, these individuals could play a role in negotiating for the protection of residents in formerly opposition-held areas and other key issues such as the release of prisoners.

In addition, it will be vital to understand why specific mediators, whether they are Russian military actors or influential businessmen, are motivated to mollify the Syrian regime and proregime militias. Such an understanding may help facilitate peacebuilding in a post-conflict Syria. Policymakers interested in peacebuilding could exploit the motivations and relevant relationships of key players in negotiations in order to advocate for the protection of formerly opposition-held communities.

Throughout Syria, cross-line openings emerged out of convenience for those living on both government- and opposition-held sides. The valves between areas of control provided some benefits for civilians in opposition areas. However, the reduction of violence at holding lines, the continued trade and movement of civilians, and the disproportionately imposed taxes and bribes at these cross-line openings primarily benefited the government. Admittedly, the coordination mechanisms that emerged from these openings may have delayed government offensives or initiated reconciliation deals. Yet in Northern Homs and Da'eil, reconciliation

deals did not seem to benefit communities following the government takeover. In Madiq Castle, prior years of coordination did nothing to soften the blow of the regime's bombardment and takeover, which destroyed and emptied the town. A common theme among all the case study locations was that residents of opposition- and SDF-held areas were well aware of their tenuous position within the larger international dynamics of the conflict regardless of prior local level cooperation. In some cases, because of the lack of trust between the two sides, these actors welcomed any international mediation, as anything was deemed better than negotiating directly with the regime.

By freezing the front lines prior to 2016, the Assad regime was able to preserve its dwindling manpower. However, after the Russians entered the conflict on September 30, 2015, the government gained the upper hand and it no longer needed to maintain these cross-line arrangements. As the presence of Russian allies helped turn the tide in its favor, the regime forged ahead with its territorial ambitions. Prior cross-line communications may have delayed offensives, but did not stop them.

In the three case studies focusing on direct cross-line arrangements between opposition and regime-controlled territories, all sides benefited from cross-line trade, but many key informants believed that the government had more to gain. According to Abdul Karim al-Masri, assistant to the Syrian Interim Government's minister of finance, the government uses these cross-line areas to buy cheaper locally produced agricultural products and impose high taxes, but then prevents





Delegates to United Nations-sponsored talks—including Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy for Syria, and Bashar al-Jaafari, Syria's ambassador to the United Nations—meet in Vienna in late January 2018. (Photo by Alex Halada/Reuters)

essential materials such as medicines, building materials, fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and fuel from reaching opposition-held areas. Traders are then obliged to smuggle these goods in by paying bribes at government-held checkpoints. Additionally, government employees living in opposition-held areas continue to pass through crossings—ostensibly to work but, in most cases, simply to collect their paychecks. These ghost employees, al-Masri points out, give the appearance of a still functioning government.<sup>62</sup> In other words, opposition actors believed that the regime coordinated with them at cross-line openings for their own benefit rather than out of altruism or because of strong social bonds.

Another drawback of local arrangements is that they tend to be at the mercy of larger conflict dynamics and international actors. In the case of Madiq Castle, the head of the local council said that discussions between

the Russians and the Turks about observation posts and de-escalation zones were “to be honest, far away from us even though they affect us the most.” Nowhere is this more evident than in Menbij, where the convergence of the US military, the SDF, Turkish forces, and Syrian military forces have made it difficult for civilians in these areas to have genuine input in the decisions that will affect their lives.

In the first half of 2018, the benefits of cross-line coordination were more apparent. Da’el avoided the worst of the bombardment on Dar’a and capitulated almost immediately. Northern Homs, likewise, did not suffer the same fate as Eastern Ghouta, which suffered under a brutal government offensive that included chemical weapons attacks. Undoubtedly, the lines of communication affected the opposition’s willingness to submit to a government deal before more blood was shed. If the



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lines of communication had not been open before these offensives commenced, it is less likely that the residents of Northern Homs and Da'el would have been able to arrange such deals so quickly. Additionally, these lines of communication may have delayed an offensive on Madiq Castle. However, these existing connections appear to have only short-term benefits. Following the government takeover, the regime did not hesitate to settle scores with opposition actors and their families in Da'el and Northern Homs. Even international players with leverage over the regime, such as Russia, have had only limited capacity to negotiate for prisoner releases or halt arrests in areas recently taken by the government.

What the opposition has learned in the past year is that there are few advantages in dealing directly with the regime. Locals who negotiated with the regime on behalf of their communities are now seen as traitors. Today, most opposition actors look to international brokers to protect them, even when that mediator is Russia. Though it is understood that the Russians have a stake in this violence coming to an end and the regime remaining in power, some actors have preferred to deal with the Russians rather than the regime in some areas. Nonetheless, the Russians have leverage over the regime, making it important to explore their potential role in de-escalating violence.

Current conflict dynamics suggest that international mediation is necessary. However, anyone interested in peace or stability in Syria must also engage important local influencers and acknowledge the justified fears of formerly opposition-held communities. The growing insurgency in Dar'a illustrates the need to moderate the behavior of regime and proregime militia forces. If prisoners are not released, reconstruction efforts are not equitable, and arbitrary arrests and detentions do not stop, there is no reason to believe that stability is

sustainable. The key local influencers who were crucial to keeping the peace in cross-line areas easily could choose to follow divergent paths in the future, whether as spoilers or as guarantors of peace.

In the past eight years, the division between track 1 negotiations and the reality on the ground has grown. As a result, the sustainability and feasibility of a track 1 solution has all but vanished. Instead, Russia, Iran, and Turkey have filled the vacuum by consistently engaging local influencers in ways that Western negotiators have not done. However, because these supposed guarantors have not necessarily considered peacebuilding to be a priority, mistrust has deepened and violence has intensified. Over time, the social and economic bonds described in the case study locations have been squandered. High-level negotiations have not emphasized the potential power of exchanges between local influencers (such as tribal leaders, elders, civil society activists, traders, local military commanders) on either side. Instead, the regime took control of the process by approving certain members for reconciliation committees and sidelining individuals that may have had more credibility in their communities.

The following recommendations for negotiators and those involved in peacebuilding efforts highlight ways that the local coordination efforts described in this assessment can still have a positive impact on Syria and other conflicts.

As mistrust in armed groups intensified, civil society and community-based social actors took on a larger role in negotiating for their own terms in Homs and Menbij. In Menbij, if the US-Turkey deal had been made with ground-level engagement, it would have stood a chance at being implemented. **Negotiators should ensure that local influencers who are respected on both sides are supported and play a role in future**

**reconciliation efforts to allow for a fairer and more transparent process. To have a truly inclusive part in stabilization, negotiators and intermediaries must include actors who have the respect of their communities, not merely those who have the ear of the government.** In the case of Da'el, negotiators have not made reconciliation deals that were acceptable to the communities they claim to represent. The danger posed by negotiating solely with compromised opposition actors is playing out in the ongoing insurgency and arrest campaigns in the south.

**Those involved in track 1 negotiations should develop a keen understanding of local fears and interests to benefit future peacebuilding efforts. Track 1 negotiators and governments involved in the conflict must develop mechanisms to regularly engage with the local influencers and negotiators in cross-line areas.** By analyzing the motivations of key Syrian actors, including tribal leaders, armed groups, opposition activists, traders, local council members, to be involved in cross-line arrangements and ongoing negotiations, international policymakers will be better positioned to work toward the best possible scenarios for civilians on the ground. Local-level engagement could support local ownership of the negotiations and make them more sustainable once international actors have moved on. By working with representatives from the humanitarian community (who regularly deal with these cross-line arrangements), negotiators can learn more about how cooperation between different sides of the conflict plays out on the ground. Understanding the dynamics of these cross-line arrangements will give negotiators a window into how de-escalation and future peacebuilding can work nationwide.

**Parties or guarantors to the conflict that are involved in piecing together cease-fire agreements or so-called de-escalation zone deals should capitalize on cross-line relations and incorporate the normalization of cross-line trade and the movement of persons into the provisions of such agreements.** Even in an uneasy peace, trade and travel both provide some level of normalcy to a conflict-affected population and curb rising tensions along front lines. De-escalation agreements are key to allowing cross-line coordination mechanisms to flourish, but the tenuous nature of cease-fires throughout the conflict has constrained peacebuilding efforts through these cross-line areas.

**The United Nations and/or the international community should establish monitoring or observation points at these cross-line areas and in communities recently seized by the government in order to ensure the safety of civilians in these areas.** Currently, Russia and Turkey fill this role only when it is politically expedient for them to do so. Communities that capitulated quickly avoided government bombardment and siege, but they were not saved from arbitrary arrests and detention in the aftermath of reconciliation. Government intermediaries either do not have the community's best interests at heart or do not have enough leverage to guarantee the safety of those in opposition-held areas.

**Stabilization and peacebuilding actors should expand social connectivity between actors on both sides of conflict lines in order to improve perceptions and build trust.** Vocational trainings and agricultural and cultural projects between people from opposing sides are relatively benign, apolitical ways to begin grassroots peacebuilding initiatives through preexisting social linkages. This strategy is best applied when a more impartial security presence is possible.

# Notes

1. Weeks after the initial agreement, the four zones were delineated: Zone 1: Idlib Province, northeastern areas of Latakia Province, western areas of Aleppo Province, and northern areas of Hama Province. More than one million civilians reside in this zone. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is one of the strongest armed umbrella groups on the ground with previous linkages to al-Qaeda. Zone 2: The Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs Province, which encompasses 180,000 civilians and various rebel groups, and includes al-Qaeda-linked fighters. Zone 3: Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside, home to about 690,000 civilians. Zone 4: The rebel-controlled south along the border with Jordan, including parts of Dar'a and Quneitra Provinces, with more than 600,000 civilians.
2. After the initial interviews with these respondents, the researchers continued to reach out to these sources for additional details and updates throughout the year as the de-escalation agreements broke down in three of the case study locations. Researchers also made efforts to reach government actors involved in the cross-line mechanisms, but the process was stalled owing to the heightened sensitivity of the subject matter and potential risks posed to the interviewees.
3. Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, March 2013), 21, [www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime](http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime).
4. Monetary figures in this report were converted from Syrian pounds to US dollars using the exchange rate at the time of publication (515 pounds to the dollar).  
The National Defense Forces (NDF) are a progovernment militia, formed after the summer of 2012 and organized by the Syrian government during the Syrian Civil War as a component of the Syrian Armed Forces to fill the gap left by deserters. See Ahmed Murad, "Madiq Castle: More than a Crossing between the Regime and the Opposition" [in Arabic], *Al Modon*, April 25, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2nWwHUH>.
5. The Majlis al-Shura or shura council is a local consultative body made up of notables who may influence the selection process for the local councils and also affect the work of local councils at times. They may be administered by armed groups or independently.
6. Reportedly, checkpoints controlled by the government's NDF were asking for 500,000 Syrian pounds (almost \$1,000) for one truck of goods.
7. *Enab Baladi*, "Al-Madiq and Al-Suqaylabiyah: Cross Shelling and Strong Social Bonds," January 19, 2018, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/01/al-madiq-al-suqaylabiyah-cross-shelling-strong-social-bonds>.
8. HTS is the opposition umbrella group formerly known as Jubhat al-Nusra. See also *Enab Baladi*, "Tahrir al Sham Takes Control of Abu Dali in the Idlib Countryside" [in Arabic], October 8, 2017, [www.enabbaladi.net/archives/176982](http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/176982).
9. Statements acquired by the author from the armed groups.
10. Signed statements acquired from the area local councils and the Majlis al-Shura Council, as well as videotaped statements from the local council heads of the thirteen villages; and *Al Jazeera*, "Syria's 'De-escalation Zones' Explained," July 4, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html).
11. Natasha Hall, "In Syria, the Messenger Shoots You," Atlantic Council, March 8, 2018, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/in-syria-the-messenger-shoots-you](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/in-syria-the-messenger-shoots-you).
12. Elizabeth Parker-Magyar, "Syria's Currency Crisis Means Big Trouble for Bashar al-Assad's War Efforts," *Quartz*, October 3, 2016, [www.qz.com/796853/syrian-pound-syp-crisis-the-syrian-pounds-depreciation-means-big-trouble-for-bashar-al-assads-war-efforts](http://www.qz.com/796853/syrian-pound-syp-crisis-the-syrian-pounds-depreciation-means-big-trouble-for-bashar-al-assads-war-efforts).
13. According to local sources, regime forces asked Ahrar al-Sham to meet or exceed this payoff in order to keep the Madiq Castle crossing open, but Ahrar al-Sham refused (key informant interviews, March 12, 2019).
14. "Ninth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria, November 2017–January 2018," Siege Watch No. 9, PAX and The Syria Institute, March 19, 2018, [www.reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ninth-quarterly-report-besieged-areas-syria-november-2017-january-2018](http://www.reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ninth-quarterly-report-besieged-areas-syria-november-2017-january-2018).
15. A number of unsuccessful smaller truces were put into effect before May 2017.
16. Barazi also had been deeply engaged in negotiations to evacuate combatants and civilians in Homs city in 2014 (interview with a previous UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs staff member who was part of the coordination mechanism for evacuation).
17. A number of other informal conduits, including Sama'lil, Aqrab, Taqsis, and Harbesefseh checkpoints, have opened irregularly.

18. Ahrar al-Sham was the primary armed actor providing security on checkpoints in Dar Al-Kabireh between 2015 and 2018 (interview with journalist from Talbiseh, March 20, 2018).
19. Because of security concerns, the crossing shifted five kilometers west just one month later. Interview with Ahrar al-Sham fighter from Al-Houleh plain, March 18, 2018.
20. This group began as a small collective based in the village of Al-Komb, but has since expanded into towns west of Homs city and even in the city itself. Currently the group has between three hundred and five hundred active members in the Homs Province. Liwa al-Ridha also has a substantial presence in Al-Qabu, a town notorious for its involvement in the alleged Al-Houleh massacre, an atrocity carried out by a local militia against several towns in Al-Houleh region (UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," Twenty-first session, Agenda item 4, August 15, 2012, [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50.doc](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50.doc); and an interview with a relative of a civilian permitted to cross into government territory).
21. Violations committed by Liwa al-Ridha led to a breakdown of the truce on at least two separate occasions.
22. Since 2012, coordination committees from Homs city have been compiling lists of missing persons. Following the surrender of Homs city, the file was transferred to Al-Waer, and it became the central issue for negotiations in the district for many years. After Al-Waer fell to government forces in 2017, the file was transferred to the Northern Homs countryside.
23. The first group of evacuations to Northern Aleppo and Idlib began on May 2, 2018.
24. See the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018 dataset at [www.hno-syria.org/#resources](http://www.hno-syria.org/#resources).
25. Mohamed Nur, "Border Crossing between Regime- and Opposition-Controlled Areas in Dar'a" [in Arabic], *Al Jazeera*, May 5, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2mmzYMB>.
26. *Enab Baladi*, "Shabab al Sunna Warns Traders Not to Pay the Taxes at Checkpoints in Dar'a" [in Arabic], May 3, 2017, [www.enabbaladi.net/archives/147576](http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/147576).
27. Nur, "Border Crossing."
28. *Enab Baladi*, "Dar'a: The Reconciliation of Abtaa, between What They Said and We Said" [in Arabic], March 6, 2016, [www.enabbaladi.net/archives/67952](http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/67952).
29. Interviews with two local traders, a local national reconciliation influencer, and a Liwa al-Karama member, March 14–15, 2018.
30. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Unidentified Gunmen Kidnap the Chairman of the Reconciliation Commission in the Town of Da'el Amid Escalating Operations against Reconciliation Committees in Dar'a Province" [in Arabic], June 15, 2018, [www.syriahr.com/?p=269309](http://www.syriahr.com/?p=269309).
31. Walid Al Nofal and Justin Clark, "'Death or Humiliation': Daraa Rebels Split Over Reconciliation Deal with Syrian Government," *Syria Direct*, July 2, 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%98death-or-humiliation%E2%80%99-daraa-rebels-split-over-reconciliation-deal-with-syrian-government>.
32. SANA, "The People of Da'el Gather to Welcome the Army and Thank Them for Their Release from Terrorism" [in Arabic], June 30, 2018, [www.sana.sy/?p=775401](http://www.sana.sy/?p=775401).
33. Interviews with key informants, March 10, 2019; and *Enab Baladi*, "The Security Branches of the Syrian Regime Launched an Arrest Campaign in the Cities of Da'al and Sheikh Maskin in Rural Daraa, Following the Visit by the Head of the General Intelligence Division, Muhammad Mahla to the Region" [in Arabic], February 25, 2019, [www.enabbaladi.net/archives/283954](http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/283954).
34. *Nedaa*, "Assad's Intelligence Knocks Down the People of Da'el" [in Arabic], January 9, 2019, [www.nedaa-sy.com/news/10934](http://www.nedaa-sy.com/news/10934).
35. *Baladi News*, "Arrests Continue in Da'el and Anti-Regime Writings in Ghabaghib in Dar'a" [in Arabic], February 26, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2oA6ICL>.
36. *Al Souriya*, "Assassination of the Most Prominent Leaders of 'Reconciliation' in Dar'a" [in Arabic], December 9, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2QIk9U9>.
37. *Al Dorar*, "Targeting the Air Intelligence Branch in Da'el, in Rural Daraa, and a Large-Scale Military Security Alert" [in Arabic], February 3, 2019, [www.eldorar.com/node/131072](http://www.eldorar.com/node/131072).
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Throughout the conflict in Syria, freedom of movement often has been restricted or in some cases impossible during periods of prolonged fighting. Yet the movement of people and goods, including vital foodstuffs, medicines, equipment, and fuel, has been more feasible in certain areas than others. In many cases, local arrangements, historical circumstances, and key actors have been able to facilitate trade and movement across the lines of conflict. This report examines four cross-line areas and draws potential lessons for reconciliation, peacebuilding, and postconflict justice. These case studies can potentially provide guidance to those involved in cease-fire or reconciliation negotiations to help protect civilians that have been caught in the crossfire.

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