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The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria

Abdullah Al-Jabassini

**Syria Transition
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The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria

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Executive Summary

In June 2018, the Syrian regime forces backed by Russia launched a military offensive that aimed at terminating rebel rule and restoring control over southern Syria. By August 2018, Daraa's rebel organisations were pushed to surrender under a "patchwork" strategy, including Russian-led negotiations between regime and opposition figures, and the Syrian regime's use of armed force. The two fundamentally divergent approaches have demarcated three main zones in which the regime's authority and thus the roles former rebels come to play in the post-rebellion period vary significantly.

In eastern Daraa, Russia established the Eighth Brigade, a sub-division of the Fifth Corps, and entrusted Ahmad al-Oda, a former rebel leader, with its command. By incorporating former rebels in the Eighth Brigade's ranks, Russia, in fact, intended to establish a local armed actor characterised by a wide margin of manoeuvre to handle local security affairs and inflict acceptable and monitored small-scale violence to limit the regime's authority and to keep Iranian influence at bay, thereby limiting status quo violations.

For more than two years, the Eighth Brigade has limited the regime's authority, served as a bulwark against Iranian expansion, intervened to defuse tensions, and mediated to prevent wide-scale regime-led military offensives against several localities, all of which are Russia's top priorities to maintain the status quo in the south. Nevertheless, the Eighth Brigade has been mired in struggles to overcome and mitigate top four interrelated challenges. First, the absence of official recognition by the Syrian Ministry of Defence. Second, the ambitions of Iran and its proxies in southern Syria. Third, the intermittent cyclical patterns of retaliations with local armed groups in neighbouring province of Sweida. Fourth, the ongoing rivalries among former rebel leaders.

Introduction

The end of September 2020 marked five years since the launch of the Russian military intervention in Syria, during which the Syrian regime's territorial control has increased from less than 20 percent in 2015 to more than 70 percent today.¹ One of the key strategies that helped Russia to achieve this rapid shift in territorial control was the consolidation of a ceasefire, which dovetailed with local reconciliation agreements. In 2017, Russia proposed to contain the conflict in four designated “de-escalation” zones: Idlib, northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and parts of Daraa and Quneitra in southern Syria.²

In reality, Russia was forging a strategy by which it combines negotiations with rebel groups with unrestrained and indiscriminate use of force to impose local agreements, thereby pushing rebels to surrender and allowing the Syrian regime to assert greater territorial control. Indeed, and except for parts of Idlib governorate that remain a rebel-held area at the time of writing, this approach succeeded in compelling rebels to surrender in Eastern Ghouta (March–April 2018) and in northern Homs (May 2018), resulting in forced displacement of many civilian and rebel actors. This granted the Syrian regime full authority with no restrictions imposed on the presence and behaviour of its military and security forces.³

However, Russia was aware of the need for a milder approach for a regime return to the south, mainly to mitigate the danger of a regional escalation in an area that sits at the intersection of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Jordan. Due to Israel's and Jordan's concerns about the flow of Iranian and pro-Iranian forces into their border regions,⁴ Russia adopted a relatively lenient approach in Daraa, which excluded Iran's participation and put more emphasis on dialogue and relative compromise.⁵ In June 2018, the regime forces, backed by Russia, launched a military offensive in Syria's south. During the military advance, Russian interlocutors offered the rebels the opportunity to engage in negotiations which guaranteed the return of civilian government institutions to resume service provision, the restriction of access and presence of the regime's military and security forces, and the incorporation of former rebels into the Russian-backed Fifth Corps.⁶

¹ Al-Jazeera, “Syria Calls US a ‘Rogue State’ over Trump's Kill al-Assad Plan”, 16 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/313ERLF>.

² In May 2017, representatives from Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara met in Astana, Kazakhstan, and agreed to set up four so-called “de-escalation zones” within which there would be a halt of hostilities between rebel groups and the Syrian regime forces. See Manhal Baresh, “The Sochi Agreement and the Interests of Guarantor States: Examining the Aims and Challenges of Sustaining the Deal”, Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/36FEkmR>.

³ Reuters, “Rebels Agree Withdrawal Deal for Enclave Near Syria's Homs”, 2 May 2018, <https://reut.rs/32qYC0l>; “Despair and Decay : East Ghouta After 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule”, Policy Paper (Middle East Institute and ETANA, November 2019), <https://bit.ly/3pgTPZt>; Ninar al-Ra'i, “Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta”, Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, August 2019), <https://bit.ly/3k890QM>.

⁴ Noa Landau, “Netanyahu Tells Putin: Israel Will Prevent All Attempts to Violate Its Borders”, *Haaretz*, 11 July 2018, <http://bit.ly/2VLcgZN>; Jack Khoury, “Israel and Russia Agree to Remove Iranian Forces From Syrian Border, Report Says”, *Haaretz*, 1 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2x4yJ9N>; Reuters, “Jordan Confident Russia Will Preserve Southern Syria Truce”, 28 May 2018, <https://reut.rs/2StBya0>.

⁵ Armenak Tokmajyan, “How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed into a Regional Powder Keg”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2SbfyCK>.

⁶ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations”, Working Paper (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, January 2019), <https://bit.ly/2CDpflK>.

While the Syrian regime's use of force coerced rebels to surrender and allowed it to reassert itself, the Russian-led negotiations prevented a full return of regime authority in parts of the south and implied a potential latitude for rebels in the post-rebellion era. In October 2018, Russia established the Eighth Brigade, a sub-division of the Fifth Corps, in Busra al-Sham town in eastern Daraa, and encouraged rebel integration under the command of Ahmad al-Oda, a former leader of Sunna Youth Forces group. While such rebel integration was one of the main promises it vowed to fulfil during the 2018 negotiations, Russia, in fact, wanted to create an armed actor whose backbone is made up of local former rebels at odds with the regime and its allies.

This research paper first demonstrates how a patchwork "reconciliation" strategy in southern Syria has demarcated three main zones in which the roles that former rebels come to play in post-rebellion vary significantly. It then investigates the key roles the Eighth Brigade performed over the course of more than two years and identifies the range of interrelated challenges that it has been facing since its emergence in southern Syria. To this end, this paper presents original data collected through consulting private archives of classified and unpublished documents, and semi-structured interviews with senior Eighth Brigade leaders and officers, as well as integrated and non-integrated former rebels in Daraa, all of which took place between March 2020 and October 2020. This paper also relies on stored data and previous interviews carried out between July 2018 and February 2020. Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this paper are derived from interviews. Giving the current situation in Daraa and to ensure the safety of all the interviewees, names and personal identifying information have been omitted.⁷

⁷ The author refrained from divulging or publishing sensitive and confidential details and evidence that would, in any way, trigger or exacerbate ongoing covert local conflicts and heighten vulnerability of populations caught up in the volatile climate in the southern Syria.

1. The Divergent Fate of Daraa's Former Rebels

In June 2018, the Syrian regime forces backed by Russia launched a military offensive that aimed at terminating rebel rule and restoring control over southern Syria. By August 2018, Daraa's rebel organisations were pushed to surrender under a "patchwork" strategy, including Russian-led negotiations between regime and opposition figures, and the Syrian regime's use of armed force. The two fundamentally divergent approaches have transformed Daraa's map into an "archipelago" in which different political orders have emerged and determined which actors are present and which territories they control.⁸ This, however, not only created disparate security climates, but also impacted the fate of many surrendered rebels who chose to stay in the governorate following the disbandment of their organisations.

While the number of rebels that fought in Daraa's rebellion exceeded 30,000, as confirmed by a top former rebel leader whose group was a constituent of the disbanded "Southern Front",⁹ about 5,000 of them refused to live under the Syrian regime's sway and were evacuated to Idlib throughout July and August 2018.¹⁰ The remaining ones who decided to stay in their localities have either weaved a route into civilian life – some of them having left Syria for Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates at various stages – or chose to retain their weapons while maintaining their allegiances, or shifting their loyalty, or adopting a fluid and opaque stance. For the second category, the motives and preferences to pursue a new affiliation are greatly shaped by the type of political order in which they live and interact. In this regard, three main types of areas can be identified in Daraa.

The first area includes localities where the Syrian regime recaptured territory itself using armed force and, consequently, has been able to reinforce its presence and assert firm control. This strategy was implemented mostly in western and northeast Daraa, and paved the way for a plethora of state military and security apparatuses to deploy additional forces with no restrictions or limitations imposed on their movements, including Iranian and Iranian proxy forces. To swell their ranks locally, pro-regime groups engaged in a campaign to reconcile and incorporate defeated former rebels, often by enforcing coercive mechanisms or offering financial incentives. In a few cases, these groups co-opted defeated former rebel leaders as a tactic to recruit their former foot soldiers too. Emad Abu Zureq and Mustafa al-Masalmeh (aka al-Kasim), two prominent former rebel commanders, along with many of their former rebels, were incorporated in local armed groups affiliated with the regime's Military Security Branch in Daraa city and Nasib town, as a reward for reconciling their status and guiding the Syrian regime to a substantial weapons cache previously possessed by disbanded rebel organisations in Daraa.

Moreover, many former rebels exhibited different forms of spontaneous support (e.g. offering information) or even joined the regime's military or security apparatus to avoid arrest and retaliation. Speaking to the author on condition of anonymity, many former rebels explained that they joined various apparatuses to decrease uncertainty and avoid reprisals in the aftermath of the rebellion. Nevertheless, the rampant violence that has plagued Daraa since 2018 appears to be a growing concern for many of them, especially as the vast majority of these incidents are carried out by unidentified actors.¹¹

⁸ For a thorough discussion on the emergence of distinct political orders in post-rebellion Daraa, see Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria", Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, April 2020), <https://bit.ly/34nt2jL>.

⁹ The 'Southern Front' is a disbanded Syrian rebel alliance established in southern Syria in February 2014, which consisted of 49 rebel groups.

¹⁰ For more details on evacuations from southern Syria, see Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria".

¹¹ Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria".

“To avoid arrest by the regime, you must join its military or security forces. That will even give you protection and you will move around freely. But today, the fear is not only from arrest, it’s more from some unknown people shooting you in the head,” as a former rebel from the al-Yarmouk Basin in western Daraa put it. The second area includes localities where rebel leaders have exhibited defiance or vacillating behaviour towards the Russian-led negotiations. Following the outcome of these negotiations, government institutions have been allowed to reopen their bureaus to deliver essential services to the local population; however, the regime’s military and security forces remain categorically banned by Russia from having access to these localities. In these areas, former rebels have different preferences. They either refused to reconcile their status with the Syrian regime and remained lightly armed and sheltered in their areas (e.g. Daraa al-Balad in Daraa city), or have reconciled their status and joined the regime’s military and security apparatuses as an ostensible tactic to continue possessing their light weapons and remain in their localities (e.g. Tafas town). The behaviour of the latter group, however, should be understood as fluctuating and closer to implicit defiance rather than absolute loyalty to the Syrian regime.¹² “You always hear that the guys [former rebels] of Tafas are traitors. I mean, indeed, for example, many joined the Fourth Division, but they did so only to stay in their hometown with their weapons. When there is a serious threat, they are the first to raid the regime’s checkpoints,” as a former rebel from Tafas explained.

The third area includes localities in eastern Daraa that were collectively represented by Ahmad al-Oda, a former leader of Sunna Youth Forces rebel group, during the Russian-brokered negotiations with the Syrian regime. Similar to the previous category, the regime’s military and security forces are prohibited from having access to these localities and their presence remains limited to sanctioned checkpoints stationed on their outskirts at junctions that connect them to national highways. However, and unlike former rebel leaders elsewhere in Daraa, al-Oda’s authentic interest in the 2018 negotiations, and his high mobilisation capacities have earned him genuine Russian patronage that maximised the privilege that he, civilians, and former rebels obtained in the post-rebellion epoch.

For its part, Russia saw in al-Oda a qualified figure to consolidate a minimum of independence and power to assist in “shielding” the status quo in southern Syria. To that end, Russia established the Eighth Brigade, a sub-division of the Fifth Corps, and entrusted al-Oda with its command. By incorporating former rebels in the Eighth Brigade’s ranks, Russia, in fact, was aiming at constructing a local armed actor characterised by loose connections with the regime and a military capacity to use, or threaten to use, violence, that is, to limit the regime’s authority and keep the Iranian influence at bay. Speaking to the author on condition of anonymity, a former top rebel leader in Daraa explained, “Unlike all of us [former rebel leaders], al-Oda was the first to accept the terms of the Russian negotiations in 2018, continued to lead hundreds of fighters, and to enjoy popular support. He fought *Da’esh* [Islamic state] and hates Iran and Hezbollah, let alone his links to regional states. I am not excluding other factors, but I think these are sufficient reasons for Russia to rely on him.”

¹² See also, Tokmajyan, “How Southern Syria Has Been Transformed into a Regional Powder Keg”.

2. The Eighth Brigade: Structure and Opportunities

Locally known as *Liwa Usud al-Harb*, or the “Lions of War Brigade”, the Eighth Brigade was established by Russia in October 2018 and stationed its headquarters in the town of Busra al-Sham. While most of its forces are concentrated in eastern Daraa, adjacent to Sweida governorate and the Jordanian border, small groups also operate elsewhere across Daraa governorate. Supported by several top former rebel commanders, the Eighth Brigade is led by al-Oda, who is also assisted by a Russian liaison officer, who takes orders directly from the Fifth Corps joint-command and Russia’s Hmeimim airbase. On the ground, the Eighth Brigade remains organised mostly as an independent infantry unit made up of four battalions, each of which is comprised of three companies, in addition to headquarters, supplies, reconnaissance, and fire-support companies.

The Eighth Brigade’s constituents receive logistical support, ammunition, and arms, including rifles, artillery, anti-tank missiles, and machine guns, through Hmeimim airbase. They are tasked with performing two main duties: first, to execute reconnaissance tasks in northern Latakia and defend this area from potential attacks launched by active rebel organisations based in Idlib. Second, to guard the headquarters in the town of Busra al-Sham, manage checkpoints, and preserve general order in the eastern region of Daraa governorate. According to a senior officer in the Eighth Brigade, “the Eighth Brigade’s fighters follow a particular schedule to know the weeks in which they are deployed to Latakia for military training and reconnaissance tasks, and the weeks in which they have to stay in Daraa to staff checkpoints and preserve security in the eastern region.”

As of April 2019, the Eighth Brigade had 1,585 officially registered fighters who exclusively hail from Daraa governorate, about 900 of whom are former rebels of Sunna Youth Forces from Busra al-Sham town and its surrounding localities.¹³ For many former rebels, the decision to join the Eighth Brigade was not driven primarily by economic incentives and private gains. Despite the promise of a monthly salary ranging from \$200 to \$300 (and paid in dollars), depending on rank, the main incentive that shapes former rebels’ preference for pursuing military service under Russian patronage is the protection they enjoy by joining the Eighth Brigade in the absence of a clear-cut peace settlement.

Indeed, the Eighth Brigade has so far intervened on many occasions to release its fighters from regime checkpoints where they were arbitrarily detained, sometimes with the Russian Military Police itself becoming involved. While many of these interventions have resulted in the nonviolent and immediate release of detainees, in several instances the situation has quickly escalated and broken out into armed confrontations against regime forces, leading to deaths and injuries.¹⁴ The fact that the Eighth Brigade has been able to defend its fighters against the regime’s transgressions has enticed many former rebels to join its ranks. In the words of a former rebel: “I joined the Brigade in late 2018 after I saw the protection the Eighth Brigade’s fighters enjoy. At that time, I was not thinking about a salary rather a plan to protect myself against the regime’s arrest.”

¹³ The remaining fighters are reconciled civilians who previously participated in opposition activities, or government employees who are not yet allowed to return to their previous government posts. See Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria”, Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2019), <http://bit.ly/2oTzoXG>.

¹⁴ In June 2020, al-Oda rapidly deployed forces to release Wassim al-Mohammed, the former head of the disbanded opposition local council in Mahja town, from detention by state security apparatus. During the confrontation, armed attacks broke out and led to the killing of Major Ali Mu’alla and two members of the Eighth Brigade. This was immediately followed by a series of skirmishes initiated by the Eighth Brigade against state security branch members near Kahil and Sayda towns, which forced them to evacuate their checkpoints.

The credible security guarantees that the Eighth Brigade offers was one of the factors that lured at least 7,000 former rebels, draft evaders, and military deserters and defectors to request to join the Eighth Brigade in June 2020.¹⁵ However, only 900 of them have received military training and participated in a graduation ceremony in the town of Busra al-Sham in July 2020. As accommodating this additional manpower was a decision taken by al-Oda without consultation with his patron, Russia, having been presented with a *fait accompli*, has refrained from providing weapons, military badges, and salaries to the new recruits, as a measure to restrain and hinder any further unilateral actions taken by al-Oda. While negotiations between al-Oda and Russia to officially incorporate this large turnout continue at the time of writing, the 900 new recruits have not terminated their affiliation with the Eighth Brigade despite the absence of economic incentives. “We do not receive salaries from the Brigade. Well, it is not a problem. I did not join for money, but protection. Al-Oda fills the streets with troops whenever one of his men is arrested, and I joined because I want someone like him to defend me in case I will be arrested by the regime,” as a former rebel who joined the Eighth Brigade in summer 2020 explained.

The Eighth Brigade has been able to capitalise on the volatility and chaos in southern Syria, and it became an armed actor with an indispensable military, security, and intermediary role. Over the course of two years, the Eighth Brigade has limited the regime’s authority and served to maintain the status quo created by Russia in parts of the south. In its role in charge of local security affairs, the Eighth Brigade has established a relatively secure climate and adopted rapid response measures to protect former rebels and civilians who reside in localities that fall under its control in eastern Daraa. Moreover, and in large part thanks to the Russian patronage that gave him bargaining power, al-Oda has opened direct channels with local institutions to convey civilian demands with regards to improving service delivery.¹⁶ Moreover, given the low Syrian regime penetration in these localities, the Eighth Brigade has granted civilians an important autonomous sphere to establish and run governance-related activities in parallel with those prescribed by the government institutions.¹⁷

The Eighth Brigade has also intervened to defuse tensions and broker agreements across Daraa. As he enjoys the backing of a military force and is respected by many clan elders and sheikhs, al-Oda has acted as an intermediary and has reserved himself a seat at any negotiation table to defuse tensions that arose between the Syrian regime and the remaining rebel enclaves in Daraa.¹⁸ Furthermore, and as the vast majority of its ranks are former rebels with adequate weapon and warfare expertise, the Eighth Brigade has exhibited combat readiness, high mobility, and operational effectiveness. This has pushed state actors to capitalise on the Eighth Brigade to advance their interests in Daraa, and beyond. In May 2020, Russia attempted to deploy fighters from the Eighth Brigade to participate in cross-border military operations and fight alongside Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA).

Despite the offer of a \$1,000 monthly salary and a renewable three-month contract, the proposal has reportedly been rejected by al-Oda. Jordan, too, has found in the Eighth Brigade a reliable actor to secure the border region. While direct coordination between Damascus and Amman with regards to southern

¹⁵ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “Is Ahmad Al-Oda Winning the ‘Hearts and Minds’ of Daraa’s People?”, *Middle East Institute*, June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3drzjhx>.

¹⁶ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries”, Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, November 2019), <http://bit.ly/38eCzKA>.

¹⁷ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, “The Baath Party, Local Notables and Coronavirus Community Response Initiatives in Southern Syria”, Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, May 2020), <https://bit.ly/2SKkcYS>.

¹⁸ For instance, when the Syrian regime launched a military operation in late February 2020 to regain the remaining parts of al-Sanamayn city from its anti-reconciliation rebels, al-Oda intervened and brokered a deal by which 21 rebels were exiled to Idlib governorate and 80 others reconciled their status with the Syrian regime.

Syria is allegedly non-existent,¹⁹ on 29 October 2020, al-Oda headed a convoy and visited Jordan, where talks about expelling Iranian elements from the border crossing and the borderline allegedly took place.²⁰ As the proximity of Iranian elements from the borders continues to cause concern, Amman sees in al-Oda a strong figure and an important local power broker to “handle the Nasib–Jabir border crossing and to remove the regime forces as well as the militias loyal to Iran from the areas adjacent to the Jordanian borders,” as a top commander in the Eighth Brigade explained.

3. The Eighth Brigade: Challenges, Threats, and Realities

So far, the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade has thus limited the regime’s authority, served as a bulwark against Iranian expansion, intervened to defuse tensions, and mediated to prevent wide-scale regime-led military campaigns against several enclaves in the south, all of which are top Russian priorities to maintain the status quo in the south. However, the Eighth Brigade has been mired in struggles to overcome and mitigate the following top four interrelated challenges manifested by various actors. First, the absence of official recognition by the Syrian Ministry of Defence. Second, the ambitions of Iran and its proxies in southern Syria. Third, the intermittent cyclical patterns of retaliations with local armed groups in neighbouring province of Sweida. Fourth, the ongoing rivalries among former rebel leaders.

3.1. Withholding Official Recognition

Since the establishment of the Eighth Brigade in 2018, the Syrian Ministry of Defence (SMD) has been heavily involved in managing and processing the enlistment applications submitted by potential recruits. However, and unlike the other sub-divisions of the Fifth Corps, the SMD has not yet recognised the Eighth Brigade as an official constituent of the Syrian military institution, which first and foremost requires a special decree issued by Syria’s General Leader of the Army and Armed Forces, President Bashar al-Assad. As such, the Eighth Brigade can be generally portrayed as a Russian-supervised semi-autonomous infantry unit whose affiliation with the Syrian military institution is nominal and loose. A serious implication of the lack of recognition is some degree of distrust and an uneasy coexistence with the Syrian regime armed forces, let alone the intermittent and reduced amounts of rations, uniforms, oil, and other logistical supplies that the SMD allocates to the Eighth Brigade in comparison to other military units. The lack of resources puts an additional burden on Russia. While it receives its armaments and its personnel salaries through Russia’s Hmeimim, the Eighth Brigade often appeals to Russia to open channels with Damascus either to extract or increase the monthly logistical supplies given by the SMD.

The Syrian regime’s reluctance to award an official recognition is mainly attributed to the Eighth Brigade’s exclusionary structure and its erratic behaviour. Fearing a gradual regime penetration and absolute hegemony over the Eighth Brigade’s leadership, al-Oda has agreed to integrate former rebels, draft dodgers, and military deserters and defectors who hail from Daraa, but he has so far refused to admit soldiers and military officers who come from elsewhere in Syria. By doing so, al-Oda hoped to prevent penetrations, maintain his mobilisation capacity, and decrease the likelihood of fragmentation and disobedience. What aggravated this situation is the Eighth Brigade’s opaque

¹⁹ Maher Abu Tayr, “Jordan is Worried about Southern Syria Again”, *Alghad*, 28 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/386T3b5>.

²⁰ Al-Oda’s visit came two days after the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ayman al-Safadi, met with senior military and Russian officials headed by the Russian Special Presidential Envoy on Syrian Reconciliation, Alexander Lavrentiev, in Amman, and discussed various aspects, including stability in Southern Syria. See Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, “The Minister of Foreign Affairs Meets the Russian President’s Envoy for the Syrian Reconciliation Affairs”, 27 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3oLvfnz>.

and fuzzy relationship with the Syrian regime and the vacillating behaviour of its fighters between support and defiance. Indeed, the Eighth Brigade's fighters have supported the regime in northern Latakia and participated in battles in Deir-ez-Zor and Sweida. Nonetheless, they have joined protests during which they called for the fall of the Syrian regime, formed a bulwark against the entry of the regime forces into areas that fall under their control in eastern Daraa, and never hesitated to confront and clash with regime military and security apparatuses, for example, for mistreating or detaining civilians or former rebels.²¹ For the Syrian regime, granting a military recognition to such an anomalous armed actor, which is contesting its sovereignty, will continue to be a perilous step.

So far, the Syrian regime has made several proposals in return for official recognition, including to place the Eighth Brigade under the command of the First Corps or to rename it and transfer its headquarters to Hama governorate, all of which al-Oda and his comrades have flatly rejected. The regime's military and security apparatus in Daraa continue to detain Eighth Brigade fighters as a form of pressure against al-Oda and a reminder that he and his fighters operate beyond the regime's control in a sphere deemed "rebellious". This has led to military confrontations on several occasions. Despite Russia's endeavours to end arrests, most recently in obtaining a new "comprehensive reconciliation" from General Ali Mamlouk's National Security Office, its latitude to acquire a recognition and further enforce its by-products remains limited, mainly due to the presence of the Iranian actor that impedes such efforts from within the Syrian military institution.²²

3.2. The Ambitions of Iran and its Proxies in Southern Syria

While Russia's overall approach in summer 2018 aimed at preventing an Iranian expansion in southern Syria, its divergent treatment of Daraa's former rebels has backfired. Shortly after Russia began incorporating former rebels in its Fifth Corps, it stopped the process in western Daraa in September 2018. Russia discharged roughly 1,700 former rebels who had joined its Fifth Corps as they refused to fight alongside the Syrian army in battles planned for Idlib, and, in mid-October 2018, it reneged on a plan to integrate them in a Hmeimim-linked security apparatus submitted by Mahmoud al-Baradan (aka Abu Murshid al-Baradan), a former prominent rebel leader in Tafas town.²³ As a result, Russia lost the mandate to play a greater role in managing former rebel affairs and left room for a multitude of actors to reconcile and recruit former rebels, including the Iranian and Iranian proxy forces (e.g. Hezbollah).

Regardless of whether Russia chose to create a tacit co-existence with Iran in the south for domestic and regional considerations, or whether its effort and latitude to contain the Iranian expansion is futile and confined, Iran and Hezbollah have been able to establish new headquarters in strategic areas in Daraa as part of their plan to establish a foothold in the region, allowing for attacks against Israel. For \$200–\$500 a month and a security badge that prevents detention and removes restrictions on movement, Hezbollah has been able to co-opt many former rebel leaders and dozens of their ex-rebel foot soldiers, especially militarily defeated rebel organisations that operated in strategic areas (e.g. al-Lajat), such as al-Omari Brigades, the Army of Free Tribes, and the Hauran Pillar Brigade.

²¹ Al-Jabassini, "Is Ahmad Al-Oda Winning the 'Hearts and Minds' of Daraa's People?"

²² The "comprehensive reconciliation" was issued in mid-September 2020. It allegedly removes the names of the Eighth Brigade's fighters from all wanted lists and grants them freedom of movement with no risk of being arrested by the Syrian regime's military and security forces.

²³ The vacillating behaviour of Mahmoud al-Baradan (aka Abu Murshid al-Baradan), a former prominent rebel leader in Tafas town, during the negotiations and his inability to mobilise his former foot soldiers, due in large part to their overwhelming rejection, to fight alongside the SAA in battles planned for Idlib governorate are two crucial factors that made Russia abandon former rebels based in the western region of Daraa. See Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria."

The presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Daraa has given rise to cyclical patterns of violence between, on the one hand, their militants and collaborators in attempts to establish a long-term foothold in the south and, on the other hand, locals and former rebels who undermine their aspirations and voice opposition regarding their presence in Daraa.²⁴ As the backbone of the Eighth Brigade are former rebels who harbour enmity towards Iran-affiliated groups and serve to curb their ambitions, Iran deems the rise of the Eighth Brigade, its recruitment activities, and extending popular support as alarming threats. Undermining the Eighth Brigade remains a top priority for Iran, not only to penetrate eastern Daraa but also to capture Busra al-Sham, the main Shi'a population centre in southern Syria, whose displaced Shi'a families are forbidden from returning to the town by al-Oda. For this, many Eighth Brigade's fighters and commanders have been targets of assassinations allegedly by members and collaborators with Iran and Hezbollah as a tactic to weaken Russia's protégé and push it towards fragmentation. "We have previously arrested the ones who planted IEDs and targeted our convoys. We now have evidence on those who attempted to kill, or even killed, our [Eighth Brigade] commanders and fighters. They are all affiliated with Hezbollah," as a senior Eighth Brigade commander succinctly put it.

The Iranian presence will remain the "mother of all challenges" for the Eighth Brigade for the foreseeable future in Daraa. The ongoing rivalry between Iran and its proxy forces and the Eighth Brigade would be the main factor underlying an upcoming and significant increase in the level of violence, which has become a defining characteristic of Daraa since August 2018. This evinces that Russia's approach in southern Syria has indeed prevented a regional escalation; however, it has been at the expense of triggering internal conflicts and resurgence of violence in the south.

3.3. Intermittent Tensions and Escalations with Sweida

Since 2018, instances of tit-for-tat and profit kidnappings have significantly increased between Daraa and its neighbouring Sweida governorate, whose predominantly Druze population has largely opted for neutrality and maintained a degree of relative autonomy since 2011.²⁵ Driven by desperate poverty, unemployment, abundance of weapons, and the tenuous regime grip over security, cycles of tit-for-tat kidnappings have eventually led to bloody clashes between the Eighth Brigade and local factions near the town of al-Qurraya, western Sweida, in March 2020. Despite the constant efforts by notables and sheikhs from both governorates to defuse tensions and prevent further escalation,²⁶ the Men of Dignity Movement (MDM), a confederation of Sweida armed factions established in 2012 that is officially neutral and led by Sheikh Yahia al-Hajjar,²⁷ issued a statement in which it blamed the Syrian government for creating a "security vacuum" in the region, held al-Oda responsible for the al-Qurraya massacre, and vowed retaliation. In late September 2020, clashes erupted in Sweida between local armed groups, backed by the MDM, and fighters affiliated with the Eighth Brigade. The clashes failed to expel the latter from areas near al-Qurraya and resulted in fourteen deaths and dozens of injuries.²⁸

²⁴ Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria".

²⁵ In 2019, for instance, 151 civilians were reportedly kidnapped by gangs and unidentified groups in Sweida, 122 of whom have been released after a ransom payment was made. See Suwayda 24, "Suwayda 24 Recorded 267 Cases of Kidnapping and Arrests during Last Year", 1 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/35pTnP9>.

²⁶ Mazen Ezzi, "How can Tension Between Daraa and As-Sweida be Contained?", MEDirections Blog, 17 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ohAzdC>.

²⁷ Mahmud Al-Lababidi, "The Druze of Sweida: The Return of the Regime Hinges on Regional and Local Conflicts", Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, August 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2870/521748>

²⁸ Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Southern Syria: 'Sibling Feud' or Engineered Violence?", Middle East Institute, 7 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/30IrdgM>.

While many in Sweida believe that their battle with the Eighth Brigade aims at settling old scores and regaining symbolically important territories near to al-Qurraya, the hometown of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, the prominent Arab Druze leader of the Great Syrian Revolution (1925–1927), others fear that Hezbollah and Iran seek to instrumentalise Sweida’s local factions to create sectarian divisions and trigger local conflicts with Daraa, which would drain the Eighth Brigade. “Sweida’s factions are being used to fight al-Oda on behalf of Iran. Al-Hajjar knows very well that members of the National Defence Forces [considered in this area as a pro-regime militia with close ties to Iran] are the ones who usually trigger the clashes.” Many interviewees from Daraa tend to agree with this narrative. Al-Oda himself, in a video issued on 2 October 2020, and obtained by the author, openly accused Hezbollah and Iran of using the sons of Sweida to achieve their “dirty” plans and stressed that good neighbourliness between Sweida and Daraa will last “despite those who want to trigger sedition”.

On 3 November 2020, local notables in western Sweida established a “Conflict Resolution Committee” to negotiate with their counterparts in Daraa and end tensions. After a series of talks, on 9 November 2020, the Eighth Brigade has agreed to withdraw from the area and remove its entrenchments and bunkers, on the condition that local factions from Sweida take responsibility to protect the area and ensure order. Nevertheless, concerns over Iranian elements attempting to penetrate western Sweida again remain a cause of alarm for the Eighth Brigade. Without further collaboration between local armed actors to fill the security vacuum and end the current state of lawlessness in the south, cyclical patterns of retaliations could re-emerge, offering an opening for the Syrian regime to reassert itself in the south. The regime is likely to manoeuvre and broaden its intervention in the south, mainly to undermine both the Eighth Brigade in Daraa and the autonomous local armed groups in Sweida.

3.4. Ongoing Rivalries Among Former Rebel Leaders

With their eyes on the advancement made by the Syrian regime forces and the unconditional and immediate surrender of rebel forces, some rebel leaders have seen in the Russian-led 2018 negotiations not only a lenient approach and an “honourable” exit from the rebellion, but also an opportunity to secure roles in post-rebellion local politics. However, ex-rebel leaders exhibited distinct behaviours and heterogeneous preferences during their involvement in negotiations. This offered Russia a criterion by which it refined the reliable and genuine ex-rebel leaders, thereby delineating the authority and margin of manoeuvre each possesses in the post-rebellion era.²⁹

Among Daraa’s former rebel leaders, only few of them have obtained new roles in post-rebellion politics. Adham al-Akrad, Mahmoud al-Baradan and Mohammed al-Duhni (aka Abu Munzer al-Duhni) are examples of prominent former rebel leaders who became members of the Central Negotiations Committee (CNC) and, together with local notables and lawyers, communicated with Russia and the Syrian regime to ensure the implementation of the terms of the 2018 agreement.³⁰ However, as he was favoured by Russia, al-Oda became the only former rebel leader who has reaped the rewards of post-rebellion gains. The genuine Russian patronage he enjoys, the military means he possesses, the bargaining power he holds vis-à-vis the Syrian regime, and his portrayal as the only local rebel leader who survived the rebellion with the capacity to elicit civilian collaboration and support are all factors that contribute to his ascension in Daraa, in sharp contrast to the limited roles played by ex-rebel leaders who joined the ineffective and atrophying CNC and have been targets of killings and assassinations.³¹

²⁹ Al-Jabassini, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria”.

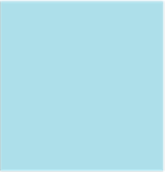
³⁰ The CNC is a civilian entity established on 3 July 2018. Its members communicated with the Syrian regime and Russia to ensure the implementation of the 2018 negotiation outcomes, such as the release of detainees, determination of the fates of draft evaders, and the return of dismissed government employees to their jobs.

³¹ Al-Jabassini, “Governance in Daraa, Southern Syria: The Roles of Military and Civilian Intermediaries”. For instance, Abu Murshid al-Baradan has so far survived three assassination attempts carried out by unidentified armed men in October 2018, February 2019, and May 2020. Adham al-Akrad, on the other hand, survived an IED planted in his car in September 2019, but he was assassinated along with other local figures in October 2020.

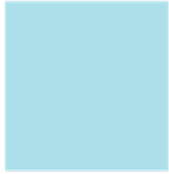
Indeed, Russia's divergent treatment of former rebel leaders has created a situation of disparate levels of local power and influence, which provided the fertile grounds for the transformation of many former rebel leaders into spoilers. The legacy of wartime competition and alliances combined with the vitality of tribal loyalties have also played a key role in creating rifts and rivalry for local power and pushed many former rebel leaders to reject al-Oda's lone ascension. In practice, many former rebel leaders looked for strategies not only to ensure their relevance to the game but also to create a situation of equilibrium in which no single ex-rebel leader dominates the trajectories of local politics. For instance, on 5 November 2020, sixteen former rebel leaders and civilian opposition figures met and discussed the merger of Daraa's CNCs in one unified political body for which the Eighth Brigade would operate as an armed wing. During the meeting, a few former rebel leaders demanded a tribal-based representation and to share the military command with al-Oda. "Even if the merger will happen, the competition between them [former rebel leaders] and al-Oda for military power will continue," as a former rebel leader put it. In some other instances, former rebel leaders did not hesitate to sow the seeds of violence to weaken al-Oda and maximise their own private gains. Evidence suggest that a few former rebel leaders have offered information and colluded with the incumbent regime to launch offensives against unreconciled rebel enclaves in Daraa. For them, helping to expand the regime's authority is an alternative strategy to undermine al-Oda's power. In the words of a former rebel leader, "Either we share power, or I will impede your plans and spoil everything for you."

Conclusion

The Eighth Brigade has benefited from volatility and chaos to shore up its influence in southern Syria and has become an important armed actor with an indispensable military, security, and intermediary role, thereby helping Russia to achieve its interests in the south. The regime's efforts to reassert itself, Iran's ambitions to expand at the expense of Russia's protégé, the fear of renewed clashes with local armed actors in Sweida, and the spoiling behaviour of rival former rebel leaders are all challenges that are likely to prevail, take different forms, and generate more violence for the foreseeable future. For as long as these challenges generate small-scale violence that do not alter the security and territorial fragmentation favoured by neighbouring countries, Russia does not seem to be concerned. However, if these threats were to weaken the Eighth Brigade and limit its influence in the south, Russia would find its latitude to limit the regime intervention and the Iranian expansion in the south quite limited. Where such a scenario would lead is an open question that is also tied to al-Oda's ability to forge local alliances apart from Russia.



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