UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE IN POSTWAR SOUTHERN SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2018, with the help of Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime launched a military offensive to recapture the country's south.[1] To mitigate the danger of regional escalation in an area that sits at the intersection of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Jordan, Russia forged a relatively lenient approach of counterinsurgency. By facilitating and mediating reconciliation agreements, Russia enabled the regime to reclaim the southern territories. However, the regime's authority remained nominal, limited, and contested in parts of the region. This is a by-product of the Russian-mediated reconciliation agreements, which enabled former rebels to keep their light weapons and facilitated the return of the state institutions, but not of the military and security services to some pockets in the south. This fragmented landscape was accompanied by a resurgence of violence. Ever since the regime returned to the south, insecurity, chaos and turmoil have become synonyms of Daraa Governorate, with frequent assassinations, kidnappings, and roadside attacks targeting individuals on all sides.

This policy brief examines the main patterns and drivers of violence in the post-war Daraa Governorate. Empirically, it draws on original data collected in semi-structured interviews conducted between July and October 2024 with clan shaykhs, former rebel leaders, former combatants, local activists, and ordinary civilians, both men and women. Moreover, this policy brief leverages two private and unpublished datasets constructed by the author since July 2018. The first is a real-time, gender-sensitive private dataset on violence in postwar southern Syria, containing more than 4,000 disaggregated entries detailing the dates, perpetrators, victims, locations, and fatalities of violent incidents that occurred in the region since the return of the regime. The second dataset includes details on leadership, manpower, and violent and criminal activities of local armed groups that emerged and operated in Daraa Governorate since August 2018.

This policy brief used data obtained from participants who gave informed consent, on condition of robust anonymisation. To ensure the safety of the interviewees, names, locations and personal identifying information are omitted. Given the volatile situation in southern Syria, and the broader region, we refrain from divulging sensitive and confidential evidence

that could trigger or exacerbate dormant or continuing conflicts and heighten the vulnerability of populations caught up in the precarious security climate of southern Syria.

This policy brief is structured around two main sections. The first section provides reflections on identity and motives of perpetrators of violence in southern Syria. The second section offers insights into some of the main drivers of violence that contribute to instability in the border region. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of key findings.

Figure1. Daraa Governorate in southern Syria

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1   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 (European University Institute, January 2019), https://bit.ly/2CDpfIK

REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN SYRIA

Since the regime's return to the south in 2018, unrest and violence in Daraa Governorate has become increasingly widespread. Hardly a day goes by without the locals hearing accounts of assassinations, kidnappings, roadside bombs, or drive-by shootings. The scope of this violence is broad, with no group spared from its reach. Ordinary civilians, government employees, Ba ath Party officials, members of the Central Negotiations Committees,[2] Eighth Brigade fighters,[3] former rebels, and opposition figures have all found themselves in the crosshairs of assailants. Even regime loyalists, collaborators with Iran, members of the Syrian military and security forces, and Russian personnel have not escaped the wave of violence. Between August 2018 and September 2024, at least 2,475 people have been killed across the governorate, [4]making it one of the most volatile and insecure regions in postwar Syria.

When discussing violence in postwar Daraa Governorate, two main and interrelated dimensions warrant mentioning. First, the unknown identity of assailants, which dominates the vast majority of the violent incidents in Daraa Governorate. Maintaining anonymity seems to grant perpetrators a sense of impunity, allowing them to employ violence without fear of immediate consequences, be it retaliation from rival groups or accountability by local communities. "Perpetrators hide their identities to strike targets with minimum fear of the consequences",[5] as put by a former rebel leader in Daraa Governorate. Furthermore, anonymity of assailants adds a layer of unpredictability to violent attacks, leaving individuals unable to anticipate who may target whom, when, or where. This pervasive uncertainty fosters an environment in which everyone—from soldiers and former rebels to civilians—feels perpetually exposed and vulnerable to sudden, unexpected assaults by armed attackers.

The anonymity of assailants leaves many community members feeling vulnerable and exposed to the whims of those who operate in the shadows. In a consequences, it disrupts daily life in profound ways. Many locals opt to avoid gatherings, modify their routines, or, driven by increasing suspicion, limit their interactions with neighbours and outsiders.[6] This deepens existing divisions and exacerbate mistrust in already war-affected communities. "After hearing about so many assassinations, it becomes second nature to fear that you might be the next victim—targeted by unknown gunmen you'd never suspect—before you even step out of your home," a civilian from Daraa Governorate explained.[7] The prevailing fear and insecurity have fundamentally reconfigured evolving gender roles within many households. The constant fear of being monitored or assassinated by unknown gunmen has compelled many men to limit their outside activities. As a result, women's roles in public life have expanded.[8] Many women gained increased autonomy as they assumed tasks such as running errands, managing household duties, and handling interactions with government offices. "Not every man in Daraa can move freely, so women have to assume more responsibilities. We go out to buy food, pay bills, travel to other cities, and even to Damascus, to take care of official paperwork," shared one woman from Daraa Governorate.[9]

The motives behind the violence constitute the second critical dimension. The unknown identity of many assailants is one fundamental factor that naturally complicates efforts to understand the real motives behind many violent incidents in Daraa Governorate.

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2   The Central Negotiations Committee is an aggregation of members of the civilian opposition, religious figures, and tribal leaders that acted as the main representative entity of the area and its population. In Daraa Governorate, two Central Negotiations Committees have operated: one in Daraa al-Balad, a district of Daraa city, which disbanded in August 2022, and another that remains active in Tafas town. Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Leaders to Post-War Intermediaries: Evidence from Southern Syria," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2312626

3   The Eighth Brigade was established by Russia in October 2018 and stationed its headquarters in the town of Busra al-Sham. Initially part of the Fifth Corps of the Syrian army, in September 2021, Russia removed the Eighth Brigade from the Fifth Corps of the Syrian army, transferring its records and affiliation to Military Security Intelligence. This move followed the Eighth Brigade's refusal to comply with Russian directives to establish permanent camps in the Badia region of Homs Governorate and to engage in battles against the Islamic State alongside Iranian-backed militias. However, the Eighth Brigade's connection with Military Security Intelligence remained nominal, primarily focusing on securing salaries and logistical support. See: Abdullah al-Jabassini, "From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria" (Florence: European University Institute, May 2019), http://bit.ly/2oTzoXG; Abdullah al-Jabassini, "The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria" (European University Institute & Geneva Centre for Security Policy, December 2020), https://bit.ly/3n2uDEr; Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Territorial Fragmentation, Violence, and Local Governance in Syria's Daraa Governorate" (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, July 2024), https://bit.ly/3ZV2uW0

4   Private dataset on violence in postwar southern Syria constructed by the author since July 2018.

5   Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

6   Series of interview with 10 civilians from various localities in Daraa Governorate, August - September 2024.

7   Interview, civilian, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

8   Series of interview with three women from various localities in Daraa Governorate, October 2024.

9   Interview, civilian, Daraa Governorate, October 2024.

"In most of the cases, understanding the real motives behind many assassinations is nearly impossible. News agencies and media outlets often speculate about intentions, but without knowing the identity of the attacker, the actual reasons behind a killing remain unknown", as explained by a local activist in Daraa Governorate.[10] Indeed, when attackers are unidentified, it becomes challenging to determine whether an incident was driven by political objectives, personal grievances, or criminal intents. The war has left behind a legacy of personal grievances, unresolved disputes, and tribal vendettas which are not directly linked to the broader conflict, yet continue to fuel cycles of violence. The pervasive assumption that all violent incidents are politically motivated represents one of the main problems of understanding violence in southern Syria.

At the same time, the blurred lines between political, criminal and personal motivations make it difficult to discern the true motives behind many violent incidents. This challenge is compounded when a single violent incident triggers a series of subsequent violent incidents, making it increasingly difficult to discern or capture the true motives behind each act. A politically motivated assassination may spark a tribal feud, or a personal vendetta might be exploited by armed groups to further their own objectives. Similarly, tribal disputes and confrontations can quickly escalate and become politicized, particularly when local armed groups intervene, seeking to exploit these conflicts for political or strategic advantage. Even criminal activities, like kidnapping for ransom or extortion are not always driven purely by financial motives. They may be deployed to serve political purposes as well, such as undermining authority, exerting control, or sending a message to rival groups or local communities.[11]

This entanglement of motivations creates a situation in which violence becomes self-perpetuating, with one type of violence leading to another in a continuous cycle. This interdependence of drivers means that violence is not a series of random or isolated events but a symptom of entangled factors that are feeding into one another. The lack of information on the identities and motives often reflects the poor and missing information on violent incidents in postwar southern Syria. Less obviously, it exemplifies how information can be systematically manipulated for political mobilization purposes in comfort with the very diverse political agendas. A former rebel leader in Daraa Governorate explained that "a civilian may be killed under the pretext of drug dealing, or a former rebel assassinated on the grounds of affiliation with the IS. In both cases, the real motive could be only settling a private dispute. Fabricated justifications, often amplified by the media,

legitimize violence and contribute to shielding the perpetrators from accountability."[12]

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10 Interview, local activists, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

11 Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, October 2024.

12 Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

PATTERNS AND DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE IN POSTWAR DARAA GOVERNORATE

Although the identity of perpetrators and the motives behind violence pose significant challenges, it is still possible to categorize some of the primary drivers of violence that contribute to instability in southern Syria. While the following list is not exhaustive and often intertwined, the following highlights some of the key drivers and patterns that characterize violence in the post-war Daraa Governorate.

LOCALISED MILITARY ESCALATIONS

From the very beginning, the regime harboured deep dissatisfaction with the 2018 reconciliation agreement brokered by Russia.[13] The core of this discontent stemmed from the fact that the agreement imposed limitations on the regime's ability to reassert full authority by preventing its military and security structures from establishing presence in certain pockets in the south. In response, the regime devised a strategy to circumvent the limitations imposed on its authority. This strategy cantered on conducting small-scale, targeted military offensives, specifically designed to dismantle vital networks of resistance, erode the semi-autonomous sphere prevailing in reconciliation areas, and apply pressure on areas that had previously accepted Russian-led agreements to avoid full regime control.

This strategic manoeuvring had strong backing from Iran, which viewed the regime's territorial expansion as an opportunity to increase its influence in the border region. These small-scale offensives allowed the regime to gradually reassert its presence in many localities, while minimizing the risk of significant international condemnation that a large-scale military campaign could provoke. More often than not, Russia, through the Eighth Brigade, intervened and brokered localised deals to prevent wide-scale military operations that threaten the status quo. Since 2018, many military escalations, or the threat thereof, were recorded at different times in areas covered by the Russian-led negotiations and characterised by loose regime control.[14] In many cases, regime escalations triggered solidarity attacks by local armed groups on regime military and security checkpoints across the governorate.[15]

In certain instances, successful regime military operations have initiated a domino effect, leading other communities to accept the regime's demands without necessitating further offensives. For example, the regime's military campaign on Daraa al-Balad in 2021, which was backed by Russia and Iran,[16] has coerced former rebels to a handover of light and medium-sized arms and allowed the regime to establish a limited foothold in the area. Many areas, sensing the shift in the balance of power—particularly as Russia's stance increasingly supported the regime—chose to engage in renewed settlements to avoid military offensive.[17]Russian military police officers and Syrian military and security forces accepted the surrender of light and medium-sized weapons, conducted brief searches of neighbourhoods, established several checkpoints and opened 'reconciliation' centres, where hundreds of applications from wanted individuals were submitted.[18] While regime's military operations, or the mere threat of them, did not always result in a stronger security grip, they continue to act as a reminder of the regime's intent to assert authority over loosely controlled areas. As one local activist explains, "The continuous threat of military offensives against reconciliation areas illustrates the regime's willingness to circumvent the 2018 agreement and expand its security control."[19]

ARMED GROUP RIVALRIES

The postwar volatile environment, lawlessness, abundance of weapons have created a fertile ground for the proliferation of armed groups – a situation unique to Daraa Governorate. Since the return of the regime to the region, dozens of armed groups with various affiliations have emerged and operated in

13   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 (European University Institute, January 2019), https://bit.ly/2CDpflK

14   For example, in Daraa al-Balad of Daraa city, Tafas, Jasim, Mzeireb, and al-Yadudeh.

15   Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Festering Grievances and the Return to Arms in Southern Syria" (European University Institute, April 2020), https://bit.ly/34nt2jL

16   Al-Jabassini, Abdullah, "Russia Rethinks the Status Quo in Southern Syria," Middle East Institute, accessed November 13, 2021, https://bit.ly/3AAx6MZ

17   Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria," European University Institute, October 2021, https://bit.ly/3BX1SzH

18   Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria."

19   Interview, local activists, Daraa Governorate, August 2024.

the region.[20] The dire economic conditions have significantly fuelled the recruitment into various local armed groups. With limited access to formal employment or sustainable income sources, many men, including former rebels and ordinary civilians, turned to armed groups as an alternative means of survival.[21] Local armed groups often provide monetary compensation, offering an immediate solution to the economic hardships faced by the population. "I can assure you that the primary driver for men joining armed groups is the current economic situation and not politics", as put by a former rebel leader.[22]

Local armed groups vary considerably in size, ranging from as few as five members to more than 80, reflecting differing levels of organization, capacity, and leadership structure. The agendas of these armed groups are diverse, often loosely-defined and fluid. Some receive support from the regime's security apparatuses and act on its behalf, while others rely on local resources and operate independently to maintain security in their respective localities. Some factions have links to neighbouring and outside states, including Russia and Iran, whereas others are mainly economically motivated groups involved in criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom and drug dealing and trafficking.

In some localities, a single armed group dominates the security landscape, such as in Busra al-Sham city where the Eighth Brigade is the main armed actor in control.[23] While in some other localities, multiple armed groups coexist or compete for influence and resources, such as in the cities of al-Sanamayn, Jasim and Nawa.[24] The proliferation of armed groups has fragmented authority in many areas. The uneasy co-existence and rivalry between local armed groups have, on many occasions, led to clashes and cycles of retaliatory assassinations in pursuit of control, resources, and sway over the population. For instance, in April 2021, intense clashes broke out between two rival local armed groups in the city of al-Sanamayn, one backed by the Military Intelligence Service and the other by the State Security Service. The confrontation led to the killing of 26 individuals, including children.[25]

That same month, the city of Jasim witnessed violent confrontations between two other local armed factions. The violence was triggered after one faction arrested and interrogated three members of the other regarding a child abduction case, resulting in both casualties and widespread property damage.[26] In July 2024, clashes erupted again in Jasim, this time between local armed groups after one accused the other of sheltering a leader of an opposing group. This conflict resulted in the death of a civilian.[27] A month later, in August 2024, two local armed groups in Nawa clashed with a third group over the imposition of a USD 2000 (SYP 30 million) monthly tax on a local bakery.[28] Clashes led to the killing of one member of the armed groups and the injury of six others. "Can you believe we have over 10 armed groups in our city? While they claim to offer security, they are actually the primary source of instability. Many of them impose taxes, engage in drug trafficking, and frequently clash with one another,"[29] as explained by one civilian in western Daraa.

VIGILANTE OPERATIONS

Vigilante operations refer to actions taken by non-state actors or local armed groups who assume the role of law enforcement without formal legal authority. These operations, typically driven by a desire to maintain order or address perceived threats, present one main causes of increasing violence in Daraa Governorate, particularly in localities where the Syrian regime holds less control. For the past few years, vigilante operations by local armed groups have focused on two main activities.

First, combating the remnants of the IS sleeper cells. During numerous discussions with representatives from reconciliation areas, regime officials have consistently pointed to the presence of IS members in certain localities as a key justification for launching military operations.[30] In response, local armed factions, recognising the potential threat of expanding regime presence posed by such justifications, have taken proactive measures to neutralize the regime's pretexts. These groups have developed and activated internal mechanisms for monitoring, investigating, and eradicating IS clan-

20   Private dataset on local armed groups constructed by the author since July 2018.

21   Series of interviews with five former rebel fighters, Daraa Governorate, September - October 2024

22   Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

23   Abdullah al-Jabassini, "The Eighth Brigade: Striving for Supremacy in Southern Syria," (European University Institute & Geneva Centre for Security Policy, December 2020), https://bit.ly/3XEec4A

24   Private dataset on local armed groups constructed by the author since July 2018.

25   "26 People from the City of Al-Sanamayn Were Killed within 24 Hours," Daraa 24, 7 April 2024, https://bit.ly/4bzBQ7x

26   "Clashes in the City of Jassim.. What Is the Regime's Role?," Horan Free League, 18 April 2024, https://bit.ly/3USBhAh

27   'Ending armed confrontations.. Reaching a solution in Jassim', Horan Free League, 18 July 2024, https://bit.ly/3MTQ6Ob

28   'Daraa: Dismantling of a Military Security Group in Nawa', Al-Modon, 17 August 2024, https://bit.ly/3TyuquH

29   Interview, civilian, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

30   For example, see: "Failure in Negotiations between the Syrian Regime Delegation and Jasim's Notables," 7 September 2022, https://bit.ly/3UVfN66

destine networks within their respective localities.[31] This process involves identifying men suspected to be IS members, dismantling sleeper cells, and conducting targeted operations to eliminate or capture those involved.[32] These efforts not only counter the immediate security threat posed by IS but also serve as a strategic defence against further regime incursions into reconciliation areas.

For instance, in October 2022, local armed groups in Jasim city initiated a significant military operation aimed at rooting out IS sleeper cells that had been operating clandestinely in the area. Through coordinated efforts, the local fighters managed to locate and eliminate three key IS leaders, severely disrupting the group's local network.[33] Soon after the Jasim operation, similar anti-IS efforts unfolded in Daraa al-Balad, where local armed factions launched another campaign to dismantle a group accused of having ties with IS. By mid-November, the operation had reached its conclusion. Several IS combatants were killed, while others, recognizing the intensity of the offensive, retreated from the area.[34] These operations not only removed immediate threats but also underscored the growing role of local factions in maintaining security without reliance on the regime, reinforcing their dominance over security sphere in reconciliation areas.

A second form of vigilante operations carried out by local armed groups revolved around combating drug trade. While the region continues to be a drug smuggling gateway into Jordan and beyond,[35] Daraa Governorate has emerged as a domestic market for illicit drugs in its own right. The fragile postwar environment, coupled with dire economic conditions, poverty, and a high unemployment rate, have enabled local stakeholders embedded in narcotics trafficking networks to recruit dealers for the local trade of drugs. As many local armed groups operate to maintain security within their territories, they have increasingly taken on the role of confronting criminal networks involved in the production and trafficking of narcotics. Access to knowledge has been a crucial factor in the success of anti-drug dealers operations. Many of the local armed factions are endogenous to the communities they operate within, giving them access to intelligence on

the identities, movements and operations of drug traders.[36] Their knowledge of local geography facilitates the planning of precise raids and ambushes, often targeting isolated farms or hidden processing sites used by criminal groups.[37]

For example, in January 2024, local armed groups launched a raid on a farm near Tafas, where a criminal group involved in drug trafficking was operating. The operation resulted in the arrest of several group members and the killing of Abdullah Ghazi al-Badawi, a notorious figure in the regional drug trade.[38] This success was not an isolated event but part of a broader strategy to dismantle the drug networks threatening local security. Later that month, another operation took place across farms between the cities of Tafas, Da el, and Atman, where local groups clashed with drug traffickers, killing one and arresting three others, including a relative of Rafe al-Rwayes, a major player in the Daraa drug trade with connections to Lebanese Hezbollah.[39]

TRIBAL CLASHES

In a region where tribal structures hold significant influence, disputes between members of different clans and families have on many occasions escalated into violent confrontations, leading to casualties, displacement of populations, and societal divisions. Tribal confrontations were typically fuelled by a mix of factors, including historical disputes and long-standing cycles of revenge often stretching back to both wartime and prewar. The sense of unresolved grievance may lie dormant for extended periods, only to escalate into violence confrontations when triggered by new incidents. Furthermore, small incidents—such as a disagreement over land use or personal slights—have in many cases quickly evolved into tribal conflicts.[40] Between July 2018 and October 2024, at least 38 tribal clashes have flared up, which led to the killing of at least 40 individuals and the injury of 24.[41]

Even when tribal conflicts arise from non-political causes, they can rapidly escalate and become politicized, especially when the regime or local armed groups become involved. Local armed groups could step in, either to support one side or to use the conflict as a way to gain influence, recruit fighters, or control

31 Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

32 Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, September 2024.

33 This group is led by Mohammed al-Masalmeh and Mouyad Harfoush. These are two figures that the Syrian regime has demanded their relocation to northern Syria during Daraa al-Balad offensive in August 2021. See: Al-Jabassini, Abdullah, "Dismantling Networks of Resistance and the Reconfiguration of Order in Southern Syria."

34 Interview with a local activists in Daraa city, November 2022.

35 Joseph Daher, Nizar Ahmad and Salwan Taha, 'Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan: The Evolution and Delegation of a Practice,' European University Institute, April 2022, https://bit.ly/3SRN1As

36 Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, October 2024.

37 Interview, former rebel leader, Daraa Governorate, October 2024.

38 Interview with members of local armed group in a locality near the Syrian Jordanian border, January 2024.

39 Interview with a local activist in western Daraa, May 2024.

40 Series of interview with civilians and clan shaykhs from various localities in Daraa Governorate, August - September 2024.

41 Private dataset on local armed groups constructed by the author since July 2018.

territory. As a result, the conflict intensifies, with far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the original issue to create social divisions. The involvement of local armed groups further complicates traditional mechanisms of justice by clan shaykhs, as their involvement often shifts the focus from the original dispute to broader struggles for power and control.[42] In other cases, the Syrian regime has exploited tribal clashes as a pretext to assert its role as the mediator in local conflicts by launching military offensives aimed at reestablishing full control over loosely-controlled areas. For instance, in mid-January 2021, violent clashes broke out between the az-Zu bi and Kiwan clans in the town of Tafas, with both sides using medium-sized weapons, resulting in at least five deaths. Seizing the opportunity, the regime sought to strengthen its security presence in and around Tafas by deploying forces from the Fourth Armoured Division. Russia later brokered an agreement that required the surrender of weapons, the reopening of the local police station and other civil institutions, and allowed the Syrian military to carry out searches in specific areas.[43]

CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

In postwar Daraa Governorate, various factors converge to increase crime rates. While the prevalence of light weapons lowers the barriers to engaging in violent crime, unemployment and poverty continue to attract many individuals to engage in criminal activities in pursuit of economic resources and immediate means of survival. The types of crimes that emerge in such unstable conditions are varied, with kidnapping for ransom, theft, and robbery being particularly prominent. In Daraa Governorate, many armed and criminal groups have seen kidnapping for ransom as a lucrative venture. In 2023, the region has witnessed at least 126 kidnapping cases, which targeted 105 men, four women, 14 male minors, and three female minors. Of those kidnapped, 91 individuals were released, 29 were killed, and six remain missing, with their fates still unknown.[44]

The kidnapping of children has emerged as a method often used to settle disputes or exert pressure on families to pay ransom. In many instances, families have complied, paying the ransom demanded by the kidnappers. For example, Mayar Alaa al-Hamadi, a 6-year-old child, was finally released in October 2020 after enduring a year in captivity. His kidnapping was allegedly linked to a dispute between his family and another group over the profits from smuggling activities.[45] In other instances, the motive behind the kidnapping of children remained unclear, particularly since the kidnappers did not demand a ransom payment. One such example is Salam Hasan al-Khalaf, an 8-year-old girl who was kidnapped in March 2020. Since her abduction, no further information has surfaced, leaving her fate unknown.

Theft and robbery have also increased significantly as individuals, driven by economic desperation, seek immediate financial rewards through criminal means. In 2021, the region registered the highest number of homicide victims, with 115 out of 414 victims nationally. This marked the fourth consecutive year that the region had the highest crime rate.[46] The spread of drug trade and consumption seems to play a key factor in the increase of crime. Because dealers sell drugs for cash, but also accept items such as motorbikes, jewellery, car parts, copper cables, livestock, and solar panels, many addicts have engaged in thievery to acquire money for drugs.[47] In 2019 and 2020, nearly 90% of thefts dealt with by police stations in Daraa Governorate were committed by drug dealers and users.[48]

42 Series of interview with civilians and clan shaykhs from various localities in Daraa Governorate, August - September 2024.

43 "The Central Negotiations Committee and the Regime.. The Final Meeting," Horan Free League, 8 February 2021, https://bit. ly/4ba5mRP

44 'Continuous Bleeding in Daraa 2023', Horan Free League, 5 January 2024, https://bit.ly/4djUXmy

45 'A Child Was Released After Being Kidnapped For Nearly a Year,' Daraa 24, 23 October 2020, https://bit.ly/3XXPdtd

46 "414 Homicide Victims, 50 Percent Detected within 48 Hours and 95 Percent Within Two Weeks," Al-Watan, 14 December 2021, https:// bit.ly/33rGDu1

47 Interview, former rebel, western Daraa, 2022.

48 "Drugs in Daraa, an Organized Operation Targeting Young People in Particular," Daraa 24, 26 March 2022, https://bit.ly/3DLI1rm

CONCLUSION

The complexities of violence in postwar Daraa Governorate reveal a landscape fraught with entangled identities, motives, and patterns. The persistent disorder and instability seem to serve the present interests of many local actors, making its continuation desirable. For the regime, this state of violence and fragmentation provides a cover under which it co-opts, manipulates, and eliminates opposition while avoiding the high cost associated with direct confrontation. The regime's attempts to assert greater sovereign control through violence are likely to persist, as will the resistance to this strategy by some local factions. On the other hand, this volatile environment provides many local armed groups a space to pursue their own agenda, be it to undermine the regime's attempts to assert greater sovereign control, compete for influence, resolve private conflicts and settle old scores, engage in illicit activities, or accumulating wealth. Many of these armed groups are now so deeply entangled in the prevailing order that their survival depends on its continuation. Therefore, the collapse or reconfiguration of the prevailing order would likely signal their demise.

However, in a region marked by regional contentious, local politics in Daraa Governorate are deeply intertwined with regional considerations and foreign actors. In this context, Iran's influence in the peripheral region plays a critical role in shaping the trajectory of southern Syria. Since the return of the regime to southern Syria, Iran aimed to exploit the region's proximity to Israel. Now, with the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, and rising tensions between Israel and Iran, southern Syria stands on the edge of becoming a new battleground. The region could see a rapid escalation of violence as these larger conflicts ripple outward, transforming southern Syria into a flashpoint in the broader regional struggle. The interplay of these conflicts makes it increasingly likely that southern Syria will bear the brunt of heightened military confrontations, particularly in Quneitra Governorate, where Iran's influence is stronger and has its roots in the early years of the war, unlike in Daraa Governorate where Iran does not exercise outright control and navigates widespread opposition from the local populace.