

# Assad's Lethal Peace Deals

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On the night of April 7, 2018, the Assad regime carried out the largest chemical attack since its infamous 2013 sarin massacre, killing over seventy civilians and causing over nine hundred suffocation cases within hours. One week later, a US-British-French coalition responded with missile strikes knocking out three key facilities linked to the Assad regime's chemical program. These strikes were beneficial in that they introduced at least a modicum of deterrence from further chemical attacks. Policy debate and global public opinion then turned to other matters.

But inside Syria, the negative impacts of the Assad regime's deadly chemical massacre were strongly felt, and they continue to reverberate to this day.

The massacre was perpetrated in the town of Douma, the largest suburb east of the capital, Damascus, and at that time the last town in the capital's East Ghouta suburbs to resist regime control. The town had been part of a yearlong local ceasefire linked to Russian-declared "de-escalation zones," before Russia shattered its own ceasefire with a scorched-earth air campaign from February to March 2018 that left 1,500 dead. This relentless assault left most of the once-extensive opposition communities in East Ghouta displaced or conquered by the Assad regime, except for Douma, where a new ceasefire had been signed.

This was the context for the April 2018 chemical attack on the town of Douma: it was both a violation of a local ceasefire recently arranged for Douma and the culmination of a monthlong military campaign that shattered a local ceasefire for the larger Ghouta region. The chemical attack achieved its goal despite US retaliatory strikes. Within days, to stem further bloodshed, rebels in Douma were forced to accept a new local ceasefire that mandated their departure and the town's return to regime control.

In the weeks that followed, the Assad regime and Russia used the example set in East Ghouta, particularly Douma, to parlay other long-standing local ceasefires into forced displacement of pro-opposition populations, including

- the southern neighborhoods of Damascus,
- the mountainous Qalamoun region north of Damascus,
- and a collection of towns near the central Syrian city of Homs.



More recently, the Assad regime, with heavy involvement of Iranian proxy militias and close air support from Russia, has launched an existential assault on the so-called de-escalation zone in southwest Syria. This zone covers opposition territories in the Syrian provinces of Daraa and Quneitra and was negotiated directly between US president Donald Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin—the Assad regime’s main backer—a year ago. As tanks carrying Assad regime forces and Iranian proxy fighters rumbled toward the front lines of the Daraa de-escalation zone in June 2018, regime warplanes dropped minatory leaflets opining, “Your brothers in East Ghouta made the right choice and helped the Syrian Army remove the militants,” clearly implying that what happened in Ghouta before this desperate decision was made could happen again in Daraa.

One year later, thousands of civilians have died and tens of thousands have been displaced, while Iranian militias are on the cusp of acquiring a border with the major Jordanian and Israeli population centers that abut Daraa. Local ceasefires are to blame. It is, therefore, time to lift the veil on the false allure of Syria’s local ceasefires.

## Background

American policy makers and diplomatic officials worldwide often show a highly flawed understanding of the local deals between the Assad regime and Syrian opposition groups. These deals, typically referred to as “local ceasefires” or “evacuations,” often earn praise for temporarily reducing violence or suffering in a given locale. UN humanitarian operations coordinator John Ging, for instance, praised the so-called evacuation agreement that evicted residents from the city of Homs in mid-2014 as “evidence of what can be done.”<sup>1</sup>

Policy analysts have similarly pointed to local ceasefires as a potential way forward. In 2014, former Obama administration officials Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson praised the Homs ceasefire as an exemplar of “the classic ‘inkblot’ strategy” in which “such ceasefires could turn into more lasting arrangements for local governance.”<sup>2</sup> Carnegie’s Yezid Sayigh similarly argued that a national ceasefire would “embolden and empower civilian communities . . . making it harder for their leaders and commanders to order a return to armed conflict.”<sup>3</sup> This effusive praise minimized the fact that this evacuation came after years of siege and starvation; in fact, this premature approbation may have signaled to the regime that starvation campaigns leading to local ceasefires would be tolerated by the international community.

These analyses, however, fundamentally misunderstand the origins and purposes of local ceasefires. Such ceasefires serve two core purposes for the Assad regime. First, they enable the regime to regain control of areas—especially densely populated urban areas—that it cannot defeat militarily, by surrounding and starving the population until local rebels agree to forced population transfers. This has occurred in the province of Homs and in many suburbs of Damascus. Even in sprawling rural or semiurban areas where residents

can undermine a full starvation siege, local ceasefires help the regime achieve its ultimate conquest.

Second, local ceasefires relieve the Assad regime's severe manpower shortage. Due to its status as a minority regime<sup>4</sup> that advances the interests of the minority Alawite sect (all the while exploiting the Alawites), Assad regime forces have been severely outnumbered throughout the Syrian conflict. This means that the regime "must pick its battles, fighting aggressively in some places and just holding on in others."<sup>5</sup> In recent months, a number of areas that were party to local ceasefire agreements were attacked anew and conquered, especially the East Ghouta and northern Homs de-escalation zones, two of four such zones declared by Russia in 2017.

### **Homs: The Ceasefire That Left a Ghost Town**

The city of Homs was the first major case of sectarian cleansing following a long-term siege and local ceasefire. The city emerged as a center of the prodemocracy protests in 2011, earning the moniker "Capital of the Revolution." By early 2012, the strong revolutionary sentiment in Homs had led to the expulsion of regime troops from most of the city's neighborhoods. But from 2012 to 2013 the regime gradually tightened its stranglehold on the city, and by mid-2014 residents had gone without humanitarian access for years. Many civilians were reduced to subsisting on tree leaves, weeds, and garbage scavenged from the rubble of bombardments. A final regime offensive in April 2014—not very different at its outset from developments in Daraa today—forced rebels faced with the threat of total extermination to agree to a ceasefire and evacuation the following month.

The Homs ceasefire was fraught with problems from the beginning and can hardly be classified as a ceasefire at all, being better classified as a surrender and forced displacement. However, in part due to laudatory UN statements regarding the outcome in Homs, local ceasefires were presented to Western policy makers as a potential solution to the conflict around this time.

An anecdote circulating at the time is telling. Within a week after the Homs deal, a displaced former resident returned to her home neighborhood, which had been a center of opposition activity, and was pleasantly surprised to find her house intact. She briefly returned to her temporary residence to prepare the move back home, and then returned to Homs only to find that the house had been thoroughly looted. When she tried to move back anyway, proregime paramilitaries associated with Assad's National Defense Forces showed up at her door and demanded that she leave. She returned to the refugee camp, her prospects of coming home more distant than ever.

The circumstances in this case strongly suggest that the paramilitaries had looted and taken over this former Homs resident's home, and indeed many incidents of looting were



caught on camera. The last rebel fighters to leave Homs captured video of regime soldiers removing valuable cooking gas canisters from private residences. Other video footage showed regime forces, dressed in military fatigues, assembling the looted canisters in a central area.

The looting in Homs had strong sectarian undertones. Following the forced displacement of Homsis during the ceasefires and earlier regime military victories, items stolen from their homes reappeared at markets in proregime areas at bargain prices. Locals referred to these as “Sunni markets” because regime supporters often come from Assad’s Alawite sect and regard the Syrian uprising as a revolt by the country’s Sunni majority. At the markets, Western journalists have observed buyers and sellers alike refer to the merchandise as “spoils of war.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, while the eviction of one Homs resident is merely an anecdote, evidence points to a systematic effort to displace residents. On July 5, 2013, a suspicious fire broke out at the Land Registry building in Homs. Only the top floors, which housed the land registry archives for Homs residents, were affected. Regime troops stationed on the lower floors did not respond to the fire. With the destruction of the land archives, all records of residency for displaced Homs residents were wiped out, leaving former residents dependent on the regime’s good graces for their right to return home.

In most cases, such good graces were not forthcoming. A report by the Syria Institute that includes interviews with displaced Homs residents quotes one interviewee as saying that Homsis need regime permission to return home and that most displaced residents “do not dare to ask.”<sup>7</sup> In the years since the sectarian cleansing, numerous media reports have described the former opposition areas of Homs as a “ghost town.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet the Assad regime’s efforts extend beyond population displacement and into demographic re-engineering. To replace the predominantly Sunni anti-Assad residents who fled, Iran has purchased large tracts of land in the southern suburbs of Homs, where rebel fighters had a strong presence until Hezbollah—Iran’s Lebanese Shiite proxy—dislodged them in mid-2013. Local leaders in former opposition neighborhoods of Homs have also reported resettlement of Alawite families in their areas.

### **“Kneel or Starve” in Damascus Suburbs**

The Damascus suburbs similarly saw widespread starvation sieges followed by local ceasefires and then sectarian cleansing. In these regions the regime’s manpower-related motive for local ceasefires comes into focus, as these densely populated areas often proved highly resistant to regime conquest. To help relieve its manpower shortage, the regime was particularly keen on neutralizing potential launch points for a rebel assault on Damascus.<sup>9</sup>

Rebels, particularly in the southern suburbs of Damascus, had launched a massive assault on Damascus in the summer of 2012, throwing the regime into disarray. Although the regime was able to recover and stop the assault, it suffered massive losses in northern and eastern Syria while frantically redeploying toward the capital. The regime's ability to cut off supplies to an area and then coerce local populations near Damascus into ceasefires with the brutal choice of "kneel or starve" allowed the regime later to regain the initiative in northern Syria, especially in the Aleppo area.

Particularly grueling sieges took place in southern Damascus, due in part to this area's strategic importance. Sieges in areas such as Moadamiya, Daraya, Yarmouk, and Babbila began in late 2012 and were gradually tightened throughout 2013. The first local ceasefire to be signed in this area, and perhaps in all of Syria, was in the town of Moadamiya in October 2013, after locals had been—as in Homs—reduced to eating grass and leaves to survive before they finally succumbed.<sup>10</sup> The strategy became known as "kneel or starve" because regime troops wrote this phrase on the walls of checkpoints blocking food access to affected towns. The Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp and nearby Babbila capitulated in early 2014, with tens of thousands flocking to receive the first aid shipment to Yarmouk in a scene that drew global attention to the camp's plight. Daraya refused a similar ceasefire and was subjected to intensive bombardment, earning the grim moniker "the Capital of Barrel Bombs."

Although these deals were closer to surrenders than ceasefires, they were tolerated, if not supported, by many in the international community. Nonetheless, they at least initially did not lead to forced displacement. But because they were so asymmetrical, they were subject to a ratcheting effect. Local councils and fighters in various suburbs only agreed to local ceasefires because the regime had blocked all access to food. While ceasefires were supposed to restore food access, they in no way impeded the regime's ability to restrict it anew. At any time, the regime had the ability to reinstate the siege and extract further concessions from starving populations. Local ceasefires thus helped cement the starvation sieges that had brought them about in the first place and further weakened the rebels.

For instance, regime forces initially offered food to the people of Moadamiya on the condition that rebels cease attacks and fly the flag of the Assad regime. But the demands escalated over time, so that by the end of the process, rebels had been coerced into leaving urban centers and relinquishing their heavy weapons. In Yarmouk, civilians were again dying of starvation only weeks into a ceasefire after the regime reneged on its promise of restoring aid access. And in nearby Babbila, the regime drastically curtailed aid access after residents refused regime demands—not in the original ceasefire deal—that troops be allowed to use a local police station as a base.

Despite the ceasefires signed in Yarmouk and Babbila, the two areas remained under siege. Conditions worsened when ISIS set up a base in the adjoining Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood



and used that base to attack Yarmouk. An evacuation agreement saw hundreds of residents leave Yarmouk to escape the siege in early 2014,<sup>11</sup> and a second agreement resulted in further evacuations in 2016.<sup>12</sup> Yarmouk, home to around 160,000 Palestinians before the war, now houses just a few hundred civilians, according to UN estimates. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Babbila and its environs deteriorated so dramatically that the town's representatives approached the regime for a new ceasefire in early 2015.<sup>13</sup>

The regime also reneged on the ceasefire in Moadamiya, but only after forcing tens of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to return to the town, increasing the population from around six thousand to over forty-five thousand, in a move widely viewed by activists as an attempt to overwhelm the town's local council. In April 2015, despite the ceasefire that was supposed to be in effect in Moadamiya, regime negotiator Hassan Gandour issued a chilling ultimatum to the town's residents:

All residents, whether civilians, political opposition or "Free Army" armed opposition must be evacuated unless the town returns to the bosom of the state in all senses of the term. If there is no mechanism to return the town to the bosom of the state . . . within at most fifteen days from the transmission of this message, then any individual found inside the town takes his life into his hands.

I recognize and speak now to the half-men, the semi-humans, who broker in blood and in crises, that you have triumphed and achieved your goal. But I warn you that one battle will not win the war; yes, it is a war, a war you wanted, and I swear to the Almighty God by the anguished cries of our women, children and fellow residents that we will take revenge and make you regret what you have done to our nation.<sup>14</sup>

The regime reinstated a full siege on Moadamiya in August 2015, and, buoyed by the Russian intervention in Syria the following month, resumed attacks on the town at the end of that year. Renewed attacks on Moadamiya enabled Russian and regime forces to cut the road between Moadamiya and neighboring Daraya in January 2016, which tightened the siege of Daraya. Three months later, under heavy diplomatic pressure, the regime briefly allowed humanitarian aid in to the starving civilians of Daraya before launching a blistering military offensive—with over two hundred barrel bombs dropped in the first five days—which led to the sectarian cleansing of the town in August 2016.<sup>15</sup>

As in Homs in 2014, rebels in Daraya agreed in 2016 to a ceasefire and evacuation only after the regime made clear that the alternative was extermination. The regime demanded that Daraya residents relocate to Idlib, where hard-line elements are stronger, and where rebels from Daraya affiliated with the Free Syrian Army were eventually abducted by al-Qaeda militants. Reports from Daraya after the sectarian cleansing indicated that family members of fighters from Harakat al-Nujaba, an Iran-backed Iraqi militia with strong Shiite extremist

leanings, had supplanted local residents. About three hundred Moadamiya residents with Daraya origins were also evacuated to Idlib in September 2016.

### Conquered Towns That Signed Local Ceasefires

In the case of Moadamiya, an agreed-upon ceasefire enabled the regime to concentrate its firepower on a neighboring town, renege on the ceasefire, and eventually conquer the nearby town. But in other cases, towns and neighborhoods that signed ceasefires were themselves overrun, their populations forcibly displaced years after initial ceasefire deals with Assad were signed. Ironically, many policy analysts who supported the local ceasefire concept when it first came into vogue in 2014 cited these towns, which were to be displaced years later, as examples of successful local ceasefires.

For instance, a London School of Economics study in 2014 concluded that the ceasefire in the Barzeh neighborhood of Damascus was “closer to a win-win situation”<sup>16</sup>—an outcome that, as the authors neglected to mention, hinged on the rebels’ successful leveraging of their ability to block a key highway. Yet even in this neighborhood, problems emerged from the beginning. I responded to the study at the time by highlighting the dangers of the Barzeh ceasefire in an article titled “The U.N Is Walking into a Trap in Syria—Here’s How to Avoid It”:

Last week, a spokesman from the Barzeh Local Council denounced the regime for violating ceasefire terms. According to the spokesman, the regime has not withdrawn troops from the area and conducts regular arrest raids against civilians. Fuel supplies are running out, U.N. aid is being redirected, and the regime troop presence is actually increasing. Such a scenario is quite far from a “win-win situation.”<sup>17</sup>

It turned out that the regime was using the ceasefire as a strategic military tool. In early 2017, some three years after the initial ceasefire was put in place, and with the regime feeling renewed confidence following its conquest of Aleppo, regime forces attacked and seized Barzeh along with the neighboring towns of Qabun and Tishrin and forced thousands to depart for Idlib<sup>18</sup> in a new round of ceasefire agreements. This outcome was especially dangerous because it removed key smuggling routes from Damascus to the East Ghouta suburbs from opposition control, leading to a dramatic worsening of the siege on the East Ghouta de-escalation zone and threatening over four hundred thousand civilians with starvation.

A similarly tragic outcome prevailed in the Homs neighborhood of Waer, which was cited by Simon and Stevenson in 2014 as a “workable *modus vivendi*” and an exemplar of their proposed “inkblot” strategy, in which “ceasefires turn into more lasting arrangements for local governance.” Yet the siege of Waer—the last opposition-held neighborhood in Homs after the 2014 Homs ceasefire—was never fully lifted, and bombardments never entirely





ceased. In December 2015, some seven hundred residents left Waer in an evacuation made necessary by three years of starvation.<sup>19</sup> And in March 2017, Waer was emptied of its ten thousand inhabitants in another evacuation sparked by intensive Russian air strikes.<sup>20</sup> At present, the town is under the control of the Assad regime.

A third location in which the regime attacked and forcibly displaced the population is Wadi Barada (Barada Valley). In Wadi Barada, the ceasefire was more informal, but the basic agreement was clear to both sides: if the regime tried to attack the Wadi, locals would close Fijeh Spring, which provided drinking water to Damascus. Engineers at Fijeh Spring became *de facto* mediators<sup>21</sup> in the informal ceasefire between the Assad regime and rebel forces in Wadi, relaying messages between the two sides as well as providing daily updates on the status of the spring.

But in Wadi Barada, as in Barzeh and Waer, the regime felt emboldened by its conquest of Aleppo to ignore a long-standing agreement with residents in the area and launch a fresh assault. Indeed, soon after the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, regime forces began intimating to the residents of Wadi that they would soon meet the fate of Aleppines. The regime spread a false rumor that Wadi residents were about to poison the spring, and then initiated a fierce bombing campaign that appeared to target the spring and nearby aquifer.<sup>22</sup> In January 2017, regime forces bombed the aquifer, causing massive and perhaps irreparable damage<sup>23</sup> to the Damascus water supply. Because Wadi lies close to the stronghold of the Iranian proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hezbollah was also deeply involved in this offensive. As Syrian and Hezbollah forces slowly advanced, locals were forced to surrender; some two thousand Wadi residents were evacuated from their homes on January 30, and the area returned to regime control.<sup>24</sup>

### **Local Ceasefires and the Starvation of Madaya**

Local ceasefires are appealing because they at least temporarily reduce human suffering in affected communities. However, a ceasefire signed not far from Wadi Barada, in the mountain town of Zabadani in September 2015, did not even meet this basic standard. Syrian and Hezbollah forces launched their final assault on Zabadani in July 2015, unleashing a barrage of barrel bombs that United Nations envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura blamed for “unprecedented levels of destruction and many deaths among the civilian population.”<sup>25</sup> The Assad regime and Hezbollah gradually advanced on Zabadani throughout July, while issuing periodic warnings for rebels to “surrender or die.”<sup>26</sup> After two more months of fighting, rebels were forced into a United Nations–sponsored ceasefire in September.

Under the terms of the ceasefire,<sup>27</sup> rebels and “their family members who wished to leave” were to evacuate Zabadani for Idlib, while “hostile measures such as . . . closing the roads



to Madaya” were to cease. But rather than honor these terms, proregime forces, particularly Hezbollah, took far more sinister steps.

After most rebel fighters had left Zabadani for Idlib, Hezbollah moved into the city center and forced thousands of Syrian civilians to leave Zabadani for the neighboring town of Madaya. Some forcibly displaced Zabadani residents were explicitly told that they were being sent to Madaya to die from starvation.<sup>28</sup> Just three months later, under a stifling siege, Madaya residents were reduced to eating leaves, stray animals, bugs, and trash to survive. Horrifying images from Madaya of skeletally thin children starving to death and crying for food triggered global outrage.<sup>29</sup>

By the time heavy diplomatic pressure forced the Assad regime and Hezbollah to allow in a UN aid convoy, dozens of civilians had already died from starvation. Furthermore, despite the aid convoy, the suffering of civilians continued in the city, and numerous children<sup>30</sup> were seriously wounded<sup>31</sup> after being shot by Hezbollah snipers while attempting desperate escapes. By late 2016, Save the Children was reporting a rise in child suicide attempts<sup>32</sup> in Madaya due to the ironclad siege. An evacuation deal was finally reached in March 2017,<sup>33</sup> leading thousands to be removed from Madaya and Zabadani the following month.<sup>34</sup> Some residents of Kafraya and Fua in northern Syria, which were under siege by rebel hard-liners, were also moved out in what was dubbed the “Four Towns Agreement.”

## UN Culpability

While local ceasefires have seldom improved the plight of civilians in the long term, rebels and local councils had little choice but to agree to them in the face of overwhelming suffering and pressure from starving civilians. However, the United Nations, which is not subject to such pressures and has many options regarding local ceasefires, has been remiss. UN diplomats and aid officials have tacitly encouraged Assad’s “starve or surrender” tactics in a number of ways.

First, the UN has consistently failed to condemn regime sieges. During its Geneva diplomatic talks on Syria in February 2016, the UN Security Council passed a resolution that mentioned then-besieged Daraya by name and demanded aid access.<sup>35</sup> In May 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry even set a June 1 deadline for access,<sup>36</sup> with the implication that humanitarian airdrops by the United States would be on the table unless the UN was granted humanitarian access.

The regime met the deadline by allowing in only enough aid to feed a quarter of Daraya’s residents. UN officials stood by as regime operatives removed high-protein items from the aid packages, which reduced their overall effectiveness. UN officials didn’t have to simply sit by as the regime gutted their aid convoy; they could have threatened to withdraw the



convoy entirely, which might have triggered the humanitarian airdrops threatened by Kerry if his deadline went unmet.

Yet UN aid officials in Damascus chose to interpret their mandate in the most narrow and proregime manner possible, allowing the regime to follow the letter of the mandate but not the spirit. Similar complaints were heard from activists in neighboring Moadamiya in late 2013, when the siege of that town was at its worst:

You know what? This regime takes the prize for trickery. I'm not sure if most people outside Syria understand how amazingly deceitful this regime is with its media spin. I mean who would have thought you could take a straightforward demand, "Food, now," and twist it by basically saying: "You will take only these scrapings of food, directly from our bloodstained hands that have been murdering you, and you will do it now, on our degrading terms." Then, they will boast in front of the world that they're giving us "food," and try to destroy the momentum we are gaining for serious international humanitarian aid.<sup>37</sup>

The Assad regime was indeed successful in curbing international momentum in Daraya, Moadamiya, and elsewhere, and UN aid officials played a role in assisting the process. Their dilatory approach toward delivering aid to besieged areas has helped the regime to enforce its sieges; this slowness contrasts with their later vigorous efforts to evacuate civilians, after ceasefires are signed, aboard the now-notorious "green buses"<sup>38</sup> that provided de facto logistical support for sectarian cleansing.

Furthermore, the UN has allowed its ostensibly objective estimates of the number of civilians under siege to be manipulated by the Assad regime. This problem was initially brought to light when images of the abject suffering of besieged Madaya residents reached global attention in early 2016. It emerged that, only months earlier, the UN secretary-general had released a report on the implementation of UN resolutions in Syria that failed to list Madaya as besieged.<sup>39</sup>

Although over two thousand residents were ultimately evacuated<sup>40</sup> from Zabadani and Madaya, this UN report found only five hundred besieged persons in the district of Zabadani, where the towns of Zabadani and Madaya are both located. Only after gruesome images from Madaya triggered a global furor did the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) admit that they had been denied access to Madaya since October 2015,<sup>41</sup> soon after Hezbollah sent civilians to Madaya to starve. Scandal erupted when a scathing *Foreign Policy* report published in late January 2016 found that OCHA, "after consulting the Syrian government, altered dozens of passages and omitted pertinent information to paint the government of Bashar al-Assad in a more favorable light."<sup>42</sup> This suppression of the facts continues. In June 2018, the *New York Times* revealed that "horrific

details” blaming the Assad regime for chemical attacks and other atrocities in East Ghouta were deliberately “left out” of a final report by a UN panel investigating war crimes in Syria.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, UN diplomacy has at times effectively encouraged sieges and sectarian cleansing of civilians, as when UN aid coordinator John Ging praised the forced eviction of the residents of Homs as “evidence of what can be done.” These impacts are particularly relevant to Aleppo, which saw some hundred thousand civilians besieged and forcibly displaced in 2016.

As early as 2014, the specter of starvation threatened Aleppo, Syria’s largest city. Proregime forces had been on the cusp of surrounding the city for some time, and the prospect of an imminent siege<sup>44</sup> was frequently discussed in the media.<sup>45</sup> It seemed as though Aleppo would soon be subjected to the same kind of local ceasefire that had been signed in Homs, Daraya, and elsewhere. Yet instead of treating this as a problem, de Mistura made the potential for a local ceasefire in Aleppo<sup>46</sup> the centerpiece of his new “freeze zones” initiative.<sup>47</sup>

While de Mistura undoubtedly did not intend for civilians in Aleppo to starve, the congruence between his freeze zones initiative and the regime’s local ceasefires strategy left de Mistura’s diplomacy highly vulnerable to regime exploitation—a fact that I warned his office of at the time.<sup>48</sup> Sure enough, Assad tried to fold the freeze zones initiative into his local ceasefires military strategy by accepting de Mistura’s proposal and cutting the last supply line to Aleppo on the same day.<sup>49</sup> De Mistura, compounding his previous errors, chose to minimize developments on the ground and market this development as a diplomatic breakthrough; rebels launched a fierce counterattack and rejected the deal.<sup>50</sup>

The next time the fate of Aleppo hung in the balance was in the summer of 2016. After a year of additional efforts with heavy Russian support, proregime forces had managed to cut the last main rebel supply line to Aleppo, which ran north of the city, in February 2016.<sup>51</sup> But in July and August, rebels launched what they called the “Great Battle of Aleppo” and managed to open a new supply line from the south. Amid a regime counterattack and heavy fighting, de Mistura again called for a truce<sup>52</sup> to allow for aid deliveries to both regime and opposition areas of Aleppo.

A problem soon emerged, however: the UN insisted on delivering aid only using Castello Road—the final road captured by the regime—because it was “the safest and most direct route.”<sup>53</sup> The UN ignored the strenuous objections of Aleppo activists and the democratically elected Aleppo City Council that by using Castello Road rather than the newly opened southern road, the UN would be cementing the Assad regime’s siege of Aleppo.<sup>54</sup>



Had the UN heeded these objections and insisted on using the southern Ramousa Road, or both roads, to deliver aid, the regime's "starve or surrender" plan for Aleppo might have been thwarted. Instead, as in the previous year, UN proposals for an Aleppo freeze or truce increased pressure on the opposition and meshed with the regime's forced displacement strategy. The regime soon recaptured Ramousa Road, enforced a full siege, and launched a bloody final offensive in which women killed themselves to avoid rape by regime forces<sup>55</sup> and aid workers lost count of the dead, before all residents of opposition-held Aleppo were displaced to Idlib in what was essentially another local ceasefire.

Even as UN investigators find Assad responsible for chemical attacks,<sup>56</sup> recently leaked UN documents<sup>57</sup> seem to suggest that the United Nations' reconstruction plans for Aleppo were heavily influenced by the Assad regime. Leaving the reconstruction of the city Assad so wantonly destroyed under his direction will only further entrench the displacement of tens of thousands of former residents. This is hardly a surprise to those of us who have watched UN Syria operations closely, however. As one former UN official told the *Guardian*, every UN agency has hired at least "one person who is a direct relative of a Syrian official."<sup>58</sup>

### **Russia's De-escalation Zones: Scaling Up**

In summer 2017, only months after earning bipartisan praise for Tomahawk strikes on the Assad regime in retaliation for a nerve gas attack on the town of Khan Sheikhun, President Trump made his first major stumble in Syria policy. Trump agreed with Vladimir Putin on a "de-escalation zone" for the southwest Syrian provinces of Daraa and Quneitra. This agreement, by extension, also ratified the broader Russian de-escalation zones plan that was framed as a violence reduction measure but was in fact a scaling-up of previous local ceasefires, with the same problematic ulterior motives.

The Russian de-escalation zones were declared in May 2017, ostensibly to stop violence in the four main opposition pockets left in Syria: Idlib province and its environs, Daraa and Quneitra provinces, the northern suburbs of Homs, and the East Ghouta suburbs of Damascus. These de-escalation zones were an outgrowth of the Astana diplomatic process, which was jointly administered by Russia, Iran, and Turkey and was notable for its silence on the need for a political transition.

The de-escalation zones proposal was initially appealing in that, for a time at least, it reduced attacks by the Assad regime on many Syrian opposition population centers, particularly Idlib, Daraa, and Homs. However, because these zones included no path to a nationwide transition plan and established neither enforcement mechanisms nor links between different zones, the Russian de-escalation proposal essentially amounted to four large-scale local ceasefires enacted simultaneously. This means that the zones were subject to the same abuses and revisions of terms found in previous local ceasefires signed by the regime.

Furthermore, the Russian proposal contained a time bomb, about which I tried to warn State Department officials: the plan excluded the two opposition territories in the Syrian Desert, the Tanf region on the Syrian-Jordanian border and the East Qalamoun region north of Damascus. The exclusion of these zones came at a time when the Pentagon-backed Free Syrian Army rebels near Tanf military base were actively competing with Iranian proxies over control of the desert. Rebels at Tanf were trying at the time to relieve their counterparts in the Qalamoun region north of Damascus suffering under a long-standing Islamic State siege, while boxing in Iranian proxies who sought to traverse the same territory to secure a ground route to the Mediterranean and to Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon. Yet because of enactment of the Russian de-escalation zone and American acquiescence, the opposite occurred: by facilitating regime redeployments to the desert, the zone empowered the Iranian proxies and compromised the Pentagon-backed rebels.

The day the zones were announced, the Assad regime's elite Tiger Forces militia redeployed from the northern Hama suburbs (adjoining the Idlib de-escalation zone) to the outskirts of the desert city of Palmyra<sup>59</sup> and began attacking not ISIS, but Pentagon-backed rebels who had been making rapid gains against ISIS.<sup>60</sup> Rebel forces were ultimately surrounded after the Iranian-backed Fatimiyun Division joined the fight, prompting a celebratory visit to Fatimiyun fighters<sup>61</sup> by Iranian Revolutionary Guards head Qassem Suleimani.

Pentagon officials, perhaps unaware of the import of these developments, later signaled their consent when spokesman Ryan Dillon said, "If they [regime forces] want to fight ISIS in Abu Kamal and they have the capacity to do so, then that would be welcomed. We as a coalition are not in the land-grab business."<sup>62</sup>

The referenced town of al-Bukamal (Abu Kamal), which lies on the Syria-Iraq border, was then the final major town to be captured by pro-Iran fighters to complete their corridor. It indeed fell to Iranian proxies in late 2017, with US-listed terror group Ketaib Hezbollah (backed by Iran's revolutionary guard known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, IRGC)<sup>63</sup> directly involved and Suleimani himself reportedly in command.<sup>64</sup> Nailing in the final peg in the Iranian corridor also allowed the regime to fully protect itself from the east, where there remained only Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters subject to a different US-Russian deconfliction agreement. This in turn freed up regime fighters to turn their attention on the de-escalation zones in western Syria. It was time to detonate the Russian time bomb.

## The End of the De-escalation Zones

Though Russia furnished the innocuous twin goals of "violence reduction" and "fighting ISIS" as justification for the de-escalation zones, the actual purpose and terms of these zones were ambiguous almost from the beginning. For instance, after announcing de-escalation zones in four regions of Syria simultaneously, Russia proceeded to negotiate separate agreements concerning the East Ghouta<sup>65</sup> and north Homs regions,<sup>66</sup> with inferior terms



for the opposition in both areas. In an added layer of murkiness, the East Ghouta ceasefire was initially made only with the Jaish al-Islam rebel group, which provided a pretext for the regime to continue launching attacks<sup>67</sup> on territories in Ghouta controlled by the local Free Syrian Army branch. Russia also negotiated a separate deal for southwest Syria with President Trump,<sup>68</sup> covering Daraa and Quneitra provinces, as well as the Syria-Israel border areas in Quneitra province.

Yet the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran no more intended to honor the de-escalation zones than they had the previous local ceasefires. As the regime conquered more territory in eastern Syria, protected its rear from attacks, and denied US-backed rebels a base, it grew more confident and gradually increased attacks on these zones in a strategy that had already been tried and tested in Madaya, Zabadani, Wadi Barada, Barzeh, and Waer.

First came Idlib province, where Russia resumed air raids as early as September 2017 to kick off a new regime offensive. The offensive made gradual gains over the next two months, with multiple instances of probable ISIS-regime collaboration, in which large numbers of ISIS fighters attacked the opposition from what had formerly been regime front lines, or vice versa. Russia escalated its air strikes in December—around the time it declared victory against ISIS—to enable the regime to break through opposition front lines and quickly capture the key air base of Abu al-Duhur. The regime made further advances in January 2018, capturing wide swathes of villages south of Aleppo, such that today the major population centers in Idlib and the three million residents and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in that de-escalation zone are under threat.

Next came the Hermon Mountains, an opposition pocket in southwest Syria within the purview of President Trump's de-escalation zone agreement with Putin. In late November 2017, the Assad regime escalated low-level skirmishes against rebel forces in Hermon into a major offensive, leading ultimately to the surrender and displacement of the opposition in Hermon in January 2018. This surrender gave Hezbollah its first foothold directly on the Israeli-Syrian border. Israeli alarm over the Iranian presence in Syria has grown steadily in recent months, and Hezbollah's continued successes despite a declared de-escalation zone in Hermon certainly did not deter Iran and its proxies from escalation.

East Ghouta was the first major de-escalation zone in which Russia not only violated the local ceasefire but helped liquidate the zone entirely. Regime attacks on Ghouta never really ceased, and the regime leveraged its previous capture of Barzeh—which deprived the Ghouta suburbs of their main smuggling link into Damascus—to gradually tighten the siege.<sup>69</sup> The final assault on Ghouta began in February, with widespread Russian attacks on hospitals and bomb shelters leaving some 1,500 dead. These Russian scorched-earth tactics were integral to the offensive, which culminated in the forced displacement of tens of thousands of residents—in a local-ceasefire-type deal—and a nerve gas attack on the town of Douma that left over seventy dead and triggered international strikes.

The Syrian regime parlayed the shocking brutality of its conquest of Ghouta into a wider displacement and terrorization campaign directed at other opposition pockets. Just as Wadi Barada residents were forced to agree to a local ceasefire and forced displacement under threats of Aleppo-style slaughter, residents of opposition neighborhoods in southern Damascus and eastern Qalamoun were threatened with “another Ghouta” until they succumbed. Syrian regime and Russian threats against the northern Homs de-escalation zone, after Russia unilaterally declared the zone “expired,” paved the way for the eventual elimination of this zone as well.

With Daraa currently facing an all-out assault from the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia, and the same truculent threats of “another Ghouta,” only Idlib remains of the de-escalation zones. On July 6, Assad regime forces entered the Nasib border crossing<sup>70</sup> with Jordan for the first time since 2015 after forcing rebels in Daraa into a deal ceding control over the border with Jordan.<sup>71</sup> The forced agreement, negotiated between a rebel delegation and Russia, came after regime advances<sup>72</sup> toward the border under Russian air cover. The deal also requires rebels to relinquish heavy weapons and, in some cases, become local police<sup>73</sup> under formal regime control. On July 12, the regime entered Daraa city<sup>74</sup> itself and flew its flag over the “birthplace of the Syrian Revolution.” Hundreds of civilians have been killed in the attacks and at least two hundred thirty thousands have been displaced according to UN estimates.<sup>75</sup> On July 16, standing next to President Trump in a joint press conference in Helsinki, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that Russia was “crushing terrorists in the south west of Syria.”

## Conclusion

Whether under the guise of “local ceasefires,” “freeze zones,” or “de-escalation zones,” the Assad regime’s ceasefire strategy—which is first and foremost a military strategy—has enabled the regime to achieve military dominance by subduing urban centers and alleviating manpower shortages. At present, the Assad regime and its allies, with acquiescence from the international community and heavy reliance on its local ceasefires scheme for systematic sectarian cleansing, is in a stronger military position than at any point since the start of armed conflict. Homs and Aleppo, two of the three largest cities in Syria, have risen and fallen as revolutionary centers amid wholesale population displacement by Assad and his allies. Iconic revolutionary protest centers in highly strategic areas such as Daraya and Zabadani have seen their populations besieged, starved, and forcibly displaced. Russian de-escalation zones since the fall of Aleppo have enabled Assad to repeat the feat in the northern suburbs of Homs and the East Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, with a potentially even more devastating offensive on Daraa ongoing.

In many of these areas, displaced civilians have had their belongings looted and placed on sale at “Sunni markets,” while highly sectarian policies concerning refugee return and





resettlement have been put in place. Often, mass killings and forcible disappearances have been widespread as regime forces moved in.

Even if all fighting in Syria stopped tomorrow and the prerevolution veneer of peace returned to the land, the cities Assad conquered would remain deeply wounded and the refugees he displaced would still be uprooted from their homes. Assad himself has said this. In a speech to parliament on July 26, 2015, he stated that “Syria is not for those who hold passports . . . but for those who defend it.”<sup>76</sup> As the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran’s final bloody offensive in Aleppo was under way, Assad remarked, “You have to keep cleaning this area and push the terrorists to Turkey to go back to where they came from, or to kill them.”<sup>77</sup> Similarly, soon after regime troops reached the main eastern Syrian city of Deir Ezzor, then top general for eastern Syria Issam Zahreddine threatened, “To those who fled to other countries, I beg you don’t ever return, because even if the government forgives you, we will never forgive or forget. If you know what is good for you, none of you would return.”<sup>78</sup> Policy makers may have no interest in confronting Assad or his allies, but if they wish to solve the Syrian refugee crisis, they must grapple with the full implications of these statements.

The Assad regime’s vision for a final peace in Syria is merely a scaled-up version of the local ceasefires and sectarian cleansing that have already taken place across Syria. Expert analyses advocating an inkblot strategy and diplomatic UN initiatives for local “freeze zones,” or—in the current parlance, as coined by Russian diplomats at the Astana talks—“de-escalation zones,” play directly into the hands of the Assad regime and have worsened sectarian displacement. The Assad regime’s nerve gas massacre, then forced displacement, in Douma better embodies the regime’s ultimate vision for these ceasefires than the rose-tinted analyses embraced by far too many policy makers over the years.

In April 2018, the Assad regime announced Decree 10, a new law that enables the regime to designate areas within Syria for “redevelopment.”<sup>79</sup> This designation triggers a thirty-day window for displaced former residents to either register their property at a local regime office or face the loss of that property. Since the areas most in need of redevelopment are areas devastated by regime bombardments, it can be expected that most redeveloped areas will be former opposition bastions and that most absentees from these areas left to escape the regime. For such residents to return to their old locales and identify themselves at a local regime office is tantamount to suicide. As such, Decree 10 will ensure their permanent displacement and dispossession. But these regions will not lie abandoned; leaks from sources in the regime to the opposition website Zaman al-Wasl in April 2018 indicated that some two hundred thousand Iranians have obtained Syrian passports in recent months and plan to become Syrian citizens.<sup>80</sup> The final endgame of local ceasefires is thus sectarian cleansing and repopulation by Iran and IRGC proxies.

Perhaps we can chalk up the Trump administration’s enthusiasm for de-escalation zones a year ago as a symptom of policy inertia. After all, these zones were a direct outgrowth of

the Astana Process begun under President Barack Obama. But now that the failure of these zones is clear to all and even the zone directly negotiated by President Trump is under attack, the Trump administration must square with the realities behind de-escalation zones and local ceasefires. Despite their names, they are not violence reduction measures but military strategies that undermine American interests by appealing to American desires for stability in the region.

Iran got its corridor because of the de-escalation zones and is now pivoting both its drones and its troops in Israel's direction. The largest Israeli strikes on Syria since the 1973 Yom Kippur War were carried out earlier this year in reaction to Iranian entrenchment in Syria—with many areas where Iran acquired or cemented control only as a result of de-escalation zones among the targets. Just over a week into the Syrian regime's assault on Daraa, Iranian commanders have already been seen on the front lines alongside Russian generals despite intensive diplomacy by America and its allies to prevent such a development.

The Russia-Iran-regime offensive on Daraa forced over 230,000 from their homes while eliminating vast swathes of the “de-escalation zone” negotiated between Putin and Trump directly. At the time of writing, the only areas left of the southwest Syria “de-escalation zone” are packed with displaced persons, leaving the possibility of a humanitarian catastrophe if these areas were to be captured. Unless the president is willing to enforce what's left of the Daraa “de-escalation zone” and signal clear US commitment to prevent an attack on Idlib, the worst massacres of the war and an unprecedented refugee displacement even by current standards may yet be ahead of us.

Unless it wishes to continue to delude itself, the international community ought to draw hard lessons from the Syrian tragedy, chief among which is that protection of civilians can only follow from robust and concrete protection measures, rather than from grasping frantically at bogus peace deals.

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### *The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order*

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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