

## Assassinations escalate in Daraa as 2nd anniversary of “reconciliation” nears



A picture shows destroyed buildings in the opposition-held southern city of Daraa, 2/8/2018 (AFP)

By **Walid Al Nofal**



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[المقال باللغة العربية](#)

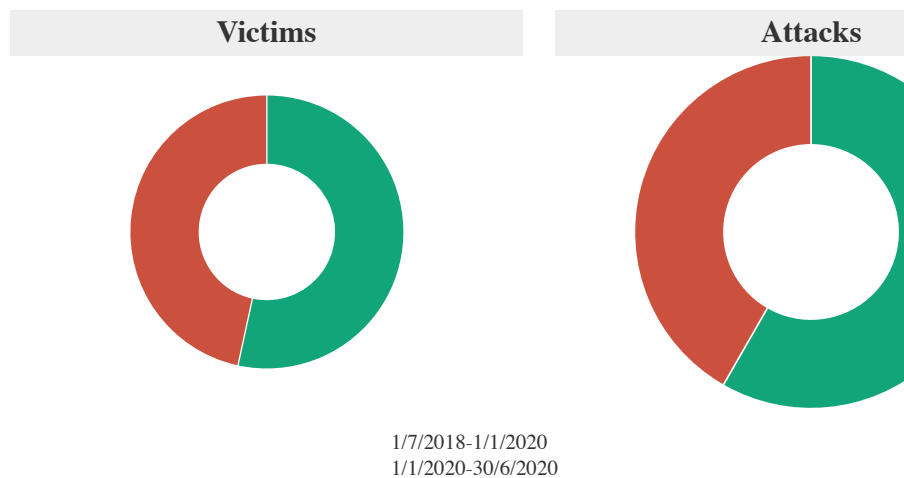
AMMAN — With the approach of the second anniversary of the so-called “reconciliation agreement” that allowed government forces and allied militias in southern Syria to take control of the opposition-held areas in Daraa and Quneitra provinces, it appears that “reconciliation” is little more than a continuation of the conflict by other means. Over the past two years, a chaotic security situation has emerged, embodied by near-daily assassinations and kidnappings targeting those on all sides: government and Russian forces, Iranian militias, former opposition armed groups and, inevitably, civilians.

Between July 2018 and July 2020, the total number of assassinations and attempted assassinations in Daraa province reached 513, killing 309 people, said Omar al-Hariri, a member of the Martyrs Documentation Office in Daraa, a local human rights organization working to document violent incidents and victims in the province.

Data gathered by *Syria Direct* for this investigation also shows a sharp increase in attempted and successful assassinations in Daraa over the first six months of 2020 in comparison with the previous 18 months, with a similar increase in victims over the same time period.

The recent spike could be explained by "Damascus' new policy in dealing with the situation in southern Syria," said two members of the Central Committee in Daraa, which negotiates with the regime and representatives of Russia, the latter of which is the guarantor of the reconciliation agreement. The two committee members spoke to *Syria Direct* on the condition of anonymity for security reasons.

### Attacks accelerate in first half of 2020



[Syria Direct](#)

✳️ A Flourish chart

"The more time goes by without remedying the lawlessness and going after the assassins, the more they will feel able to move around, organize themselves, increase their numbers and come up with [new] methods," said al-Hariri.

### The Hussam Loqa theory

Last November, Bashar al-Assad appointed Major General Hussam Loqa as head of the so-called "Security Committee" in southern Syria. Loqa succeeded Major General Qahtan Khalil, who is perceived by the local community as having a bloody record. The change came as popular protests were [increasing](#), especially in Daraa, coinciding with an escalation of military operations targeting government forces in the province.

Days after his appointment, Loqa met with members of the negotiating committees in Daraa. According to a member of the Central Committee who attended the meeting, Loqa said that he had been appointed to the new position to "impose the state authority" in the region. He stressed the need to "end armed activity and hand over wanted individuals and weapons" to the military and security services, the member told *Syria Direct*.

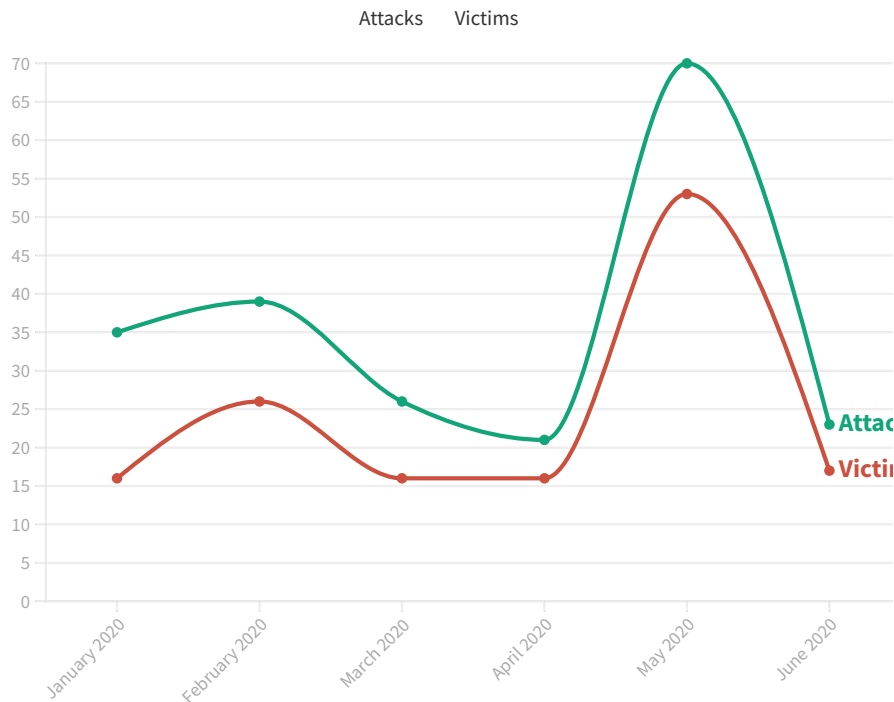
The same member of the Central Committee believes that state security services began "to adopt a new approach in recent months, especially after Hussam Loqa took over the southern issue."

"Assassinations, kidnappings and forced disappearances increased," he explained, "in parallel with various pressures to regain control over the reconciliation areas, the regime's failure to adhere to the terms of the settlement and an increase in arrests," as well as its "failure to fulfill promises to release the [previous] detainees, resolve the issue of defectors and return the army to its barracks. This increases tension in these areas, which could become like a powder keg that could explode at any moment."

In the same vein, a military commander in one of the so-called "reconciliation factions"—which is made up of former opposition fighters—in western Daraa told *Syria Direct* that the "Loqa theory" could be summed up as: "chaos justifies military incursion." The commander went on to explain that in many meetings between Daraa negotiators and the Security Committee, Loqa always signaled a military operation "under the pretext of eliminating lawlessness and ISIS [Islamic State] cells, while forgetting that his regime is the main cause of this chaos when it released scores of ISIS fighters into Daraa, in addition to assassinating his opponents and opponents of the Iranian project."

As such, if indeed the direct military conflict in southern Syria has paused as a result of the reconciliation agreement, then what has taken its place, according to a former opposition commander who is now a member of a negotiating committee in the Daraa countryside, is "a security struggle." He emphasized that "the most prominent groups carrying out assassinations are terrorist organizations [ISIS cells] and the security services, in addition to Iran."

## Attacks and victims from January to June 2020



Source: [Syria Direct](#)

✿ A Flourish chart

### Operations not fated for secrecy

On February 25, 2019, Sheikh Alaa al-Zubani, 42, was killed on his way home from a mosque in the town of al-Yadudah in west Daraa. Al-Zubani, who was a judge in the opposition-run Court of Justice in Houran, was known in the local community for his post-reconciliation criticism of the Iranian project in the area. Consequently, he was banned from preaching by the government.

Zubani, who was “killed with a silenced pistol,” as one of his relatives told *Syria Direct*, had previously faced an assassination attempt in January 2019.

In late May, activists in Daraa circulated a video recording purportedly of a person named Raafat al-Nahas, a member of the settlement factions, whose body was found dumped alongside a west Daraa road in mid-March.

In the recording, al-Nahas confessed his participation in several assassinations for the Air Force Intelligence branch, including al-Zubani’s killing. According to his confession, he and a companion—an Air Force Intelligence volunteer—shot al-Zubani in the head.

While the source of the video has not been identified, it is believed that it was filmed by former members of the opposition who captured al-Nahas, interrogated and killed him.

It is noteworthy that the video was published on May 27, days after unidentified assailants [targeted](#) members of the Central Committee in Daraa and their companions near the west Daraa town of Muzayrib. The attack resulted in the death of three people and the injury of four others. It is possible

that the release of al-Nahas's confession, which came a relatively long time after its filming, was deliberately timed to point to the responsibility of the Air Force Intelligence, not ISIS, for the attack.

In the same context, Mufleh al-Kanani, a former commander in an armed opposition group who joined the ranks of the 4th Division after reconciliation, was the target of an assassination attempt using poison in May 2019 that required he be transferred to a hospital in Damascus.

At the time, opposition-leaning media outlets and local sources accused Colonel Muhammad Issa, a member of the 4th Division's security office, of being behind the operation and poisoning a bottle of juice given to al-Kanani while he was in Issa's office.

Al-Kanani, who continues to suffer the effects of the poison to this day, was exposed to a substance that "attacks the nerves and leads to complete paralysis and blindness," journalist Tayim al-Ahmad, who lives in the countryside Daraa, told *Syria Direct*. The attempt calls to mind, al-Ahmad added, a similar incident involving former opposition leader Yamen Manajra, who was injected with poison last December by the 4th Division's security office, leaving him with semi-permanent neuropathy.

### **The Muzayrib incident will redraw the map**

On May 4, Qasim al-Subaihi, a commander of a military group in Muzayrib, [killed](#) nine policemen after kidnapping them from the local police station. Al-Subaihi had accused the government forces of kidnapping and killing his son and son-in-law.

In response, prominent tribal and local actors in Daraa issued a [statement](#) in which they condemned the killing of the nine policemen, and "disavowed the so-called Qasim al-Subaihi Abu Tareq and those who shared in his heinous act." The authors of the statement pledged to "pursue him until he is fairly punished."

This past May saw the highest number of assassinations, attempted assassinations and victims since the reconciliation agreement was signed two years ago. In all, "70 assassinations and assassination attempts were recorded, killing 53 people and injuring 14 others, including three people who survived attempts," [according](#) to the Martyrs Documentation Office in Daraa.

A high-ranking military commander in the former opposition factions in the western countryside of Daraa previously [told](#) *Syria Direct* that the Muzayrib incident would "change the map of the western region," since the regime "always tries to exploit uncalculated actions like these in order to use them against the reconciliation areas in southern Syria."

At the time, Damascus rushed to [send](#) heavily armed military reinforcements to the countryside of Daraa, threatening to storm the area. That was followed by a number of negotiating sessions with the Russian guarantor and Syrian regime security and military officers. An agreement was reached in late May allowing

the 4th Division to deploy in the western countryside of Daraa by deploying joint military checkpoints with local fighters who had reconciled and joined the Division's ranks, while military forces from outside the area would only be deployed on the outskirts of cities and towns.

Over the past three weeks, the 4th Division has begun to reinforce its presence in the western countryside of Daraa. It organized the "settlement factions" into five battalions, each led by a commanding officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel, as well as three first lieutenants and three lieutenants, all from outside Daraa province. Each battalion handles specific tasks in its areas of deployment, such as setting up military checkpoints.

Through this, the 4th Division aims to gradually "marginalize" the role of the reconciliation leaders, and make the members subordinate to 4th Division officers. Further, the 4th Division is trying to "exploit the youth in favor of mobilization by opening the door to recruitment," according to the former military commander and current negotiator, who believes this falls within "the context of the struggle for influence [inside the province], not infighting."



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The security situation in Daraa province, May 2020  
Infogram

On the other hand, Russia had pledged to keep Iranian militias away from the Jordanian border and the border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. But in addition to ongoing Iranian activity in those areas, especially through what is known as the "Iranian wing" in the Syrian regime's military and security services—the 4th Division, Air Force Intelligence, State Security and 15th-Special Forces Divisions—the Russians have not prevented the 4th Division from spreading throughout the west Daraa countryside recently.

That confirms that "there is no conflict between Russia and Iran," in the view of the former military commander-turned-negotiator. Furthermore, he believes that "the Russians are, in one way or another, responsible for the lawlessness by restricting the revolutionaries' weapons and revitalizing the so-called state apparatuses, which we consider infiltrated and corrupt."

### **The deep consequences of assassinations**

For nearly two years, Abu Mahmoud, from the city of Inkhil, has been afraid to leave home after sunset. He and his family worry that he could meet the same fate of many other former members of the Free Syrian Army who have been assassinated by unidentified assailants under cover of darkness in his city.

"The assassinations in the city affect everyone," Abu Mahmoud, a 28-year-old, told *Syria Direct*. "Staying home is the best option for your blood not to be shed in this frightening conflict."

Assassinations and lawlessness, according to the former military commander and current negotiator, "have caused the specter of fear to return to the streets [of the province], as well as cowed civil society, which is looking for safety." He likened what is happening now in southern Syria to the events of Hama during the regime's struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early '80s, which ended in the "Hama massacre" in 1982. The regime also uses "the accusation of affiliating with ISIS to go after some activists under the pretext of fighting terrorism," he added.

One of the goals of this chaos, the same source believes, is to "limit the popular demonstrations that had started to escalate, and also to weaken particular personalities." The result of all that would be "the emigration of some of the young people abroad, and instability of the economy and local investments, partially halting the [local] economy."

Al-Hariri echoed the same idea, adding that the situation "also threatens the possibility of refugees returning. Nobody wants to come back to a place where they can be killed or robbed at any moment."

The member of the Central Committee in Daraa believes, however, that the "escalating chaos and increased assassinations have necessitated that people in the south increase their communication with one another and enhance unity in order to confront the dangers that threaten them."

He went on to say that "we may see in the coming days something on the ground connected to unity, by way of unifying the [negotiating] committees and forces into a single body." According to the committee member, "there are arrangements to integrate the opposition forces in the south into a single body, which is," he added, "not related to Ahmed al-Awda's call to establish a unified army."

In a video published on June 23, al-Awda, the commander of the 8th Brigade in the Russia-backed 5th Corps and a former opposition commander, appeared addressing hundreds of people during the funeral of nine of his fighters who were killed in the bombing of a vehicle that was transporting them in the eastern countryside of Daraa. Al-Awda stated that "in the coming days, with God's will and your determination, we will announce that Houran [Daraa province] is one body, one flesh and one army... the smallest and most powerful tool to protect Syria."

The nine fighters were killed and 25 others suffered various injuries in an IED explosion on June 20. A 750-kilogram explosive device had been placed inside a water drainage channel on the road between al-Kahil and al-Sahwa east of Daraa, according to a military source from the 5th Corps who spoke to *Syria Direct* under the condition of anonymity for security reasons.

The sources said the perpetrators planted "the bomb in the drainage channel a day before the attack, meaning that they could be the same people who control the area since they easily [planted the device] despite its size, which takes time to assemble."



At the same time, the 5th Corps source refused to comment on al-Awda's announcement of a new military body, saying that "details will be announced soon" and "discussions are currently underway." He added that "the best option to stop the lawlessness and assassinations is for people of the area to take over the checkpoints as is happening in Busra al-Sham [in eastern Daraa and controlled by al-Awda's fighters], in order to maintain the security and protection of these areas."

### **Impacts of lawlessness on 'reconciliation'**

"As long as there are those who insist on the settlements, they will remain in effect," said a member of the Central Committee. "We are the ones who support and give strength to them through our insistence on activating them," he added, noting, however,

that the Russian guarantor is detached from reality in the province.

"[The Russian guarantor] keeps replacing its military police officers, so some have been there for no more than two months," he said. "Therefore they won't understand the nature of the south or what is happening there."

What matters to the Russians, the source explained, "is the absence of visible weapons, and that the south is calm and problem-free."

But the current situation and the consequences of the breakdown of security mean that "the region will not calm down until there is a total, fundamental and profound change in the regime's security [services] and the regime as a whole," the former military commander and current negotiator said. "The settlements are a stage of mitigation until a real change takes place, upon which general security can be built."

Russia's role, he added, is limited to "absorbing any development in the situation, but not to address the real causes of fundamental problems." But "the essence is that safety and security in Syria will only be achieved through a political solution, not security operations, and this demands a systemic and behavioral change in the fundamentals of the old regime."

*This report was originally published in [Arabic](#) and translated into English by Mateo Nelson.*

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