




Berghof Foundation

Reconciliation, Reward and Revenge

Analyzing Syrian De-escalation Dynamics
through Local Ceasefire Negotiations

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Preface

How to end a war that has taken over 250,000 lives in only five years? The current picture in war-torn Syria appears bleak. Syria's government has proven strong enough to stay in power and reclaim territories it had been driven out of during earlier stages of the war, despite having lost domestic legitimacy as well as international recognition over the past years. And while the fight against the government and President Assad may have been a common denominator among the armed opposition initially, opposition forces are still divided over their vision for Syria's future. This has resulted in fierce infighting among various opposition groups, with some of them even willing to enter into temporary alliances with government forces in order to gain a competitive advantage. As a further major development, ISIS has become a major force in Syria, following its own agenda of destroying the Syrian state as part of its objective to establish a caliphate across the entire Levant.

In humanitarian terms, one of the most pressing questions is how the tens of thousands civilians, taken hostage by the various warring parties in besieged areas, can be protected from the ongoing daily bloodshed. According to UN estimates some 6.5 million people in Syria are internally displaced; some 13.5 million are in urgent need for assistance.

It seems clear that the complexity and despair of the current situation can hardly be resolved by a nation-wide agreement alone, as too many parties hold stakes in this conflict and are convinced of their chances for success, regardless of the human cost. International mediators, too, have come and gone, without true breakthroughs towards sustainable peace being achieved.

Under these circumstances, local solutions might constitute a more promising approach. Local ceasefires, as one example of local solutions, could ease the humanitarian devastation caused by the conflict, as temporary breaks in fighting could allow humanitarian supplies to be distributed inside besieged areas. They could be an important signal, as an expression of intent by the parties involved to respect international humanitarian law. Even if they cannot serve as a roadmap to peace for the whole of Syria, they may offer a chance for gradual spillovers to neighboring areas. Establishing local ceasefires can help in gaining a better understanding of the complexity at play by disentangling actors' objectives and intentions. Lastly, a pause in fighting would be based on a buy-in from the fighting units and their political drivers, which could result in better framework conditions for national negotiations.

The first local ceasefire negotiations in Syria started as early as 2012, taking place mainly between the statutory Syrian army and armed opposition forces. These efforts were clearly limited to short-term humanitarian needs. By 2014, local ceasefires formed a clear part of the Syrian government's strategy in managing the insurgency as well as appeasing the strong international interests for a de-escalation of violence for humanitarian and political purposes. However, the record of local ceasefires is mixed at best, as most of the negotiated truces collapsed or failed to improve the humanitarian situation on the ground substantively. Yet even mixed results and cautious hope might turn into a more sustainable scheme, if the right conclusions are drawn from these experiences.

Samer Araabi and Leila Hilal's report provides an in-depth investigation into four different local ceasefire negotiations in Syria. It offers useful observations and initial lessons learned for further efforts towards peace in Syria. It is unique and innovative in a number of ways. The research team approached the issue of local ceasefires consulting a wide array of experiences and opinions, allowing for a broader analysis of the dynamics of local dialogues and meaningful insights into the strategies needed to manage multiple levels of conflict dynamics.

This study is the result of a project supported by the Berghof Foundation through a 2014 *Grant for Innovation in Conflict Transformation* on the topic of national dialogues. The project was implemented in collaboration with and with additional support provided by Conflict Dynamics International. National

dialogues can be understood as creative spaces for trust-building to complement, accompany or precede formal negotiations in the broader context of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Solutions that include local ceasefires or other forms of local mediation can be innovative and promising initiatives in this context, given the complex background of the armed conflict in Syria. They bear the potential of becoming role models for other localities throughout the country and hence help create conditions conducive to a nation-wide ceasefire and peace agreement. In this, local initiatives can connect to a potential subsequent national dialogue process.

The project has also produced a series of theory-to-practice learning materials on local negotiation dynamics for practitioners as well as inspiring the formation of Syrian learning circles. The study at hand will be translated into Arabic in order to make its lessons learned available to those actors for whom it is of most relevance. Together with Conflict Dynamics International, it is a pleasure for us to present Leila Hilal and Samer Araabi's findings from this important research.

**Hans J. Giessmann, Executive Director, Berghof Foundation
Berlin, August 2016**

Executive Summary

The Syrian conflict has protracted over the past five years with no political settlement in sight. A National Cessation of Hostilities (NCoH), negotiated between the US and Russia in February 2016, was successful in pausing fighting between the Government of Syria and armed opposition forces and in significantly reducing violence, but it was short lived. By April 2016 fighting between Government and opposition forces had resumed. As of August 2016, the immediate priority of international diplomacy, led by the US and Russia along with the UN Office of the Special Envoy, continues to focus on re-securing an NCoH.

The necessity of an international framework for de-escalating the conflict in order to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and create an environment conducive to Syrian political talks is a given. It should remain a priority of international policymakers. Yet as this report seeks to highlight, equal attention should be given to *local* conflict dynamics. Local causes and impacts of violence, and their relationship to national solutions, have received less attention so far, due to barriers of access to Syria and the fact that international actors wield overwhelming power in influencing outcomes in the war.

This report addresses this gap. It aims to contribute to analysis that will enable international policymakers and key Syrian partners, especially civil society and influential Syrians such as local notables with contacts across political divides, to seize areas of opportunity to build multi-dimensional conflict transformation strategies linking international, national and local layers and actors.

The report focuses on one prominent framework for local mediation and de-escalation ongoing in Syria since 2012: local ceasefire (*hudna*) negotiations. Based on mixed methodology research conducted between mid-2014 and March 2016, the report presents four in-depth cases of ceasefire negotiations that have taken place inside Syria since 2012 (in the locales of Zabadani, Al-Waar, Yalda and surrounding suburbs, and Eastern Ghouta). It explains the environment in which these negotiations occurred and offers observations on the obstacles and shortcomings they faced. The report concludes with a set of ideas for deepening efforts for combining grass-roots, bottom-up approaches with NCoH frameworks and broader peacebuilding efforts.

Local ceasefires in Syria have been the subject of several studies and political commentary in the recent past. Unlike previous works, this research was specifically formulated to avoid any and all preconceived notions of appropriate mechanisms for broader de-escalation efforts: rather than assuming either that existing ceasefire initiatives must be consolidated and expanded, or that they represent an unjust manifestation of “surrender by another name,” as their advocates and detractors have previously claimed, the report takes stock of what these localized ceasefire negotiations could and could not achieve.

The report concludes that while local ceasefires have rarely led to more than limited improvements in humanitarian access and public services, and temporary reprieves in fighting, they nevertheless offer important insights into local conflict dynamics that can either undermine or reinforce a national framework for de-escalation. The findings from the research include:

- ≡ Key actors with direct influence on localized de-escalation and reconciliation, including armed groups, reconciliation committees, the UN, Russia and Iran, should be mapped and their motivations understood in each locale;
- ≡ Community notables – or “middle ground” actors –, who have been pivotal in securing ceasefire deals, have played both positive and negative roles;
- ≡ External actors have catalyzed ceasefire efforts, albeit often at the expense of local priorities;
- ≡ Civil society actors, despite strong connections and capabilities on the ground, have been largely excluded from end-game negotiation processes;
- ≡ Spoilers and sectarian politics have had a notable impact in influencing perceptions of local negotiations and opportunities for de-escalating violence, often making them less attractive; and

- ≡ New forms of violence have manifested following ceasefire deals between the Government and opposition actors.

Localized measures that can contend with these structural dimensions of the conflict and leverage the role of key international and local actors toward positive conflict transformation require further exploration. Areas of opportunity for international policymakers leading conflict resolution efforts on Syria are discussed in the conclusion of the report. They range from increasing knowledge of local dynamics such as those highlighted in the report to a more active role for the International Syria Support Group and the UN in working with Syrian civil society and “middle ground actors” to synthesize stabilization measures at the local level that would complement a national ceasefire framework. The report also urges donor governments to undertake concerted efforts to better ensure that their assistance practices combat structural aspects of the conflict that enable local actors to leverage war against civilian interests. Overall, prospects for a forward looking conflict de-escalation approach will require a combined top-down and bottom-up approach. This report and follow-up initiatives can help lead policymakers closer to that goal.

1 Introduction

The Syrian conflict has evolved through several phases over the past five years. From the popular uprising that began in 2011, the conflict has morphed into a multi-layered, multi-actor war, with deep geographical and communal fissures and extensive international involvement. As early as 2012, when the focus of the Syrian uprising had begun to shift toward military insurgency, local-level ceasefire (*hudna*) negotiations began to take place in areas of the country experiencing especially acute fighting between the Government of Syria and opposition armed forces.

In 2014 when the Syrian conflict had reached a clear political stalemate, some Western and Syrian scholars and activists began to advocate for a “scaling up” of local ceasefires into a national de-escalation strategy.¹ That same year, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, took up an initiative to freeze fighting in one locale: Aleppo, a key Syrian city divided in half between opposition and government fighters, as a potential basis for building a broader peace. Though neither approach has succeeded in creating a sustainable model of conflict de-escalation to expand to a broader national state, this period was the beginning of a newfound prioritization of local ceasefires as a potential means to reduce the intensity of the Syrian conflict.

In early 2016, in the context of the UN’s effort to convene inter-Syrian peace talks in Geneva, a National Cessation of Hostilities (NCoH) was agreed to by the United States and Russia and then endorsed by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and UN Security Council (UNSC) respectively. The NCoH held for several weeks and saw a substantial decrease in violence. The quiet produced by the NCoH encouraged Syrians still inside the country to once again mobilize for peaceful change, protesting both for an end to the violence but also against poor governance and continued repression. Nevertheless, over the following months, the NCoH steadily deteriorated to the point of effective failure. Though ISSG members continue, as of July 2016, to resuscitate the NCoH, prospects for a successful revival in its current form are bleak.

This report examines in-depth four cases of local ceasefire negotiations in different areas within Syria. The research focused on understanding conflict dynamics around local ceasefire negotiations in Syria without preconceived notions of appropriate mechanisms for broader de-escalation efforts, rather than assuming that existing ceasefire initiatives must be consolidated and expanded for national peacebuilding efforts. Given that the conflict in Syria has played out in highly localized and idiosyncratic ways, the parameters of the report align with broader assumptions that any peace strategy for Syria will have to take into account these complex dynamics, largely obscured to outside observers due to the multi-dimensionality of the conflict, the lack of in-country access, and the continued focus on top-down political solutions.

Another assumption framing this report is that a national framework for peace will be essential to secure a real end of hostilities and beginnings of conflict transformation. Yet this assumption is coterminous with the need for a localized strategy. In classic peacebuilding terms this will require a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches for Syria. It will, moreover, require trusted and respected actors who can form connections between and across the top and the bottom, sometimes referred to as “middle range/ground” actors or “middle out” strategies.²

Local ceasefires in Syria have been localized, temporal, and limited in effect. They have also been mired in controversy due to their association with “siege tactics,”³ whereby areas under opposition control are

1 See for example, “A New Place for Syria”, by Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson in *The New York Review of Books* (26 September 2014), arguing for the US to adopt measures of counterterrorism in Syria based on “a series of local ceasefires that could, if properly implemented and enforced, provide a path toward stability in several regions of the country, even as conflict continues elsewhere.”

2 See John Paul Lederach. “Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies.” Washington DC: USIP Press, 1997; John Paul Lederach. “The Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace.” Oxford University Press, 2005.

3 See Section 3 for an overview of key Syrian and international perspectives of local ceasefires.

besieged by government forces (and vice versa in a few cases), who may withhold or prevent humanitarian goods from entering as leverage for opposition concessions.⁴ They have either been initiated organically through local actors desiring improved living conditions, or as part of high-level governmental strategic considerations to gain access to military routes, close down front lines, or redistribute forces. Negotiations were mostly protracted, drawing out over years and involving a range of national and international actors.

Despite the problematic and limited nature of local ceasefires in Syria, they represent a unique locus of localized mediation and therefore open a window onto localized dynamics that can help understand key influencers on the ground, their role in encouraging or preventing violence, and general national and local level variables feeding continued conflict. For instance, while international proxy forces (e.g., Russia) and the UN have been the key actors behind the NCoH and related talks, Syrian government forces, opposition armed groups, community notables, governing councils, and civil society have been the parties to local ceasefire processes.

In the context of local ceasefires, Syrians, particularly on the opposition side and/or within civil society, are raising a host of issues not necessarily on the agenda of the NCoH talks. These issues include troop redeployments, access routes, policing and demobilization, governance and monitoring. These micro-foundations would be essential to reinforcing a robust and sustainable national framework. They also require inclusive grass-roots involvement. Thus, without overlooking the many shortcomings of existing ceasefire arrangements, the studies of local ceasefires presented here do offer insights into how peacemakers may begin to think about multi-dimensional de-escalation strategies for Syria.

This report's findings are intended to contribute to thinking through options for such integrated approaches. The report presents the research methodology and background material on local ceasefires in Syria. It provides an overview of the four case studies in focus here, with an emphasis on negotiation dynamics, influential actors and outcomes. The findings offer insights into key variables impacting local processes. The report concludes by circling back to the main theme of merging top-down and bottom-up processes with areas of opportunity for international policymakers on just how that might be achieved.

⁴ Cease Fire Agreements in Syria and Their Effectiveness: A Public Opinion Poll. Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 30 September 2014. http://www.omrandirasat.org/sites/default/files/cease%20fire%20poll%20analysis_0.pdf.

2 Methodology

The findings discussed below are based on 10 months of research focusing on case study analysis of areas in Syria where ceasefires were either concluded, or pursued and in an advanced stage. The report covers four of the cases that were studied in detail through semi structured and structured interviews. These cases are: Zabadani, a small town in the west of the governorate Rural Damascus; the Al-Waar suburb of Homs city; Yalda, a small town in close proximity to the city of Damascus; and Eastern Ghouta, Damascus' eastern suburbs. (See maps of each area studied in the Appendix). The research also drew on existing literature on local ceasefires covering additional areas as discussed in Section 3.

The four case studies developed here present ceasefire negotiations that took place across Syria between the years 2013 to 2015. The cases represent a diverse set of geographic areas and actors, local circumstances, negotiation processes, and outcomes, and contain within them many of the opportunities and costs involved in ceasefire negotiations. In some cases, such as in Yalda and nearby Babila, agreements were reached as early as late 2014, affording an opportunity to better gauge the outcomes and effects of the negotiations. In others, such as Eastern Ghouta, persistent negotiations have as of May 2016 failed to yield a sustained ceasefire, shedding light on the many hurdles and limitations associated with powerful structural and economic incentives to maintain the conflict.

Information for the case studies was collected through a series of structured and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in each area, including members of the negotiating committees, combatants, local civil society groups, and a sampling of uninvolved civilians living in the target areas. Interviews in each target area included individuals directly involved in the negotiations in a variety of capacities, as members of the committee, participating armed groups, or as international observers. Efforts were made to reach Government and loyalist forces but these contacts were not possible to obtain in the course of this research. In some areas such as Tal Abyad and Ras al Ain, where research was conducted earlier in the project in 2015, Kurdish and Arab stakeholders were interviewed. Pro-regime respondents were also interviewed for other similar, although less in-depth research, such as that conducted through the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) by Charney Research discussed in Section 3.⁵ In any event, the areas covered here are now inhabited predominately by largely pro-opposition residents, who comprised the majority of respondents.

Interviewees were asked a series of 45-70 questions. Responses were compared to determine commonalities, broadly shared opinions, and snapshots of individual experiences of life before and after ceasefire agreements. They were also assessed against general findings from research conducted in other parts of Syria, as well as media and other independent analyses, many of which are outlined below or cited in the text.

⁵ “Maybe We Can Reach a Solution” Syrian Perspectives on the Conflict and Local Initiatives for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation, Craig Charney via the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2015.

3 Syrian and International Perspectives on Local Ceasefires

Analysis published in 2014 and early 2015 on localized ceasefires approached the issue from a variety of angles, including surveys of Syrian perspectives, trend analyses and case studies. Given the controversial nature of local ceasefires in Syria, most of the research was geared toward assessing their normative value or proposing prescriptive recommendations for strengthening local ceasefires through, for instance, increased international monitoring. Much of the analysis appeared to reflect the positioning of a “side” in the conflict or was otherwise received in that spirit. Few studies sought to understand the details of the conflict dynamics associated with localized mediation for learning purposes. Nevertheless, it helped highlight the complex tradeoffs inherent in most deals.

Key amongst the studies was an opinion poll conducted by the Syrian Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *Cease Fire Agreements in Syria and Their Effectiveness: A Public Opinion Poll*⁶. Omran surveyed nearly 1,000 Syrians in areas where ceasefire negotiations had been conducted and in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). 46% of Syrians surveyed favored ceasefire negotiations in their areas, but a much higher number – at 69% – voiced support for them in general. Nearly an equal amount of respondents, 70.5%, said, however that they did not feel that the ceasefires ensured values of justice, freedom, and dignity.⁷ The vast majority of respondents also pointed to conditions of besiegement as the motivating factor behind the negotiations.

The Integrity Research & Consulting firm published one of the most comprehensive reports ascertaining the overall effects and underlying motivations of Syrian ceasefires.⁸ Drawing from interviews with over two-dozen activists, civil society members, armed actors, and government figures, Integrity summarized their findings:

Integrity’s research highlights that the truces agreed in several locations across Syria in the early months of 2014 do not represent the localised beginnings of a peacebuilding process. These agreements—and the negotiation and implementation processes that delivered them—were not built upon good practice and were significantly undermined by a lack of political will for peace from the outset.⁹

Similar to the Omran poll, the Integrity report found that ceasefires did not represent a balanced agreement between parties engaged in hostilities, but rather a strong-arm tactic used by besieging government forces to extract opposition surrender in the face of starvation and military inferiority/strength. As a result, the imbalance and strategic politicization of the negotiation processes undermined long-term stability, limited civilian access to humanitarian aid, and failed to create a precedent to “raise the costs” of future attacks. Nevertheless, the report also noted opportunities to expand the ceasefires’ humanitarian impact, and argued for “some way of fostering the political will for negotiation” in the future.

⁶ Cease Fire Agreements in Syria and Their Effectiveness: A Public Opinion Poll. Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 30 September 2014. http://www.omrandirasat.org/sites/default/files/cease%20fire%20poll%20analysis_0.pdf.

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ “Research Summary Report: Local Truces in Syria.” *Integrity Research & Consultancy*, June 2014. <https://www.integrityglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/Integrity-Research-Summary-Report-Localised-Truces-and-Ceasefires.pdf>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

A comprehensive report published by the London School of Economics and the Syrian NGO Madani, *Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria*, described the modalities of local civilian mobilization to end fighting. Noting that several local initiatives were “co-opted as part of surrender policy or used as a military tactic by other forces, they have [nonetheless] delivered tangible improvements on the ground that top-level talks have singularly failed to achieve.”¹⁰

Based on an analysis of over 35 local negotiations, and interviews with key stakeholders in each area, the report’s main finding concluded:

*Neither the bottom-up approach to peace nor the top-down one is likely to deliver significant results on its own. A new, combined and integrated model is needed. Significant progress in reaching peace in Syria can only happen if local factors are considered in the context of the regional and international situation... Local ceasefire agreements should be an essential part of any solution, but they need to be part of a larger, comprehensive central peace plan.*¹¹

The report also highlighted the role of the war economy and the intransigence of international backers as key obstacles to the establishment of more effective ceasefire frameworks, and called for a broad international effort to de-escalate, mediate, and monitor the conflict in Syria in order to build on the efforts of local peace negotiations. It also placed the role of Syrian civil society groups front and center, whom it identifies as the key local arbiters and drivers of negotiated local settlements.

In the 2015 survey of local initiatives commissioned by the SJAC, Charney Research found that many regime supporters indeed viewed the local ceasefires as “evidence of the rebels’ weakness and as victories for their side.” Nevertheless, respondents surveyed across the political divide – “pro- and anti-regime alike” – favored “the greater mobility local accords would permit, such as permitting students to attend exams, allowing aid deliveries, and allowing free movement of residents.”¹²

Siege Watch, a joint project of the Syria Institute and PAX, publishes a *Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria*, which contains detailed information on current and formerly besieged areas.¹³ These locations often overlap with ceasefire negotiations, and the findings cast a more unflattering light on ceasefires than the reports referenced above:

*Local ceasefires in besieged communities in Syria have frequently failed to bring an end to the sieges. Even in cases where violent attacks cease, humanitarian access is generally minimal, movement restrictions remain, and living conditions do not improve – and sometimes worsen – following ceasefire implementation.*¹⁴

A report published by Oxfam International in March 2016 stated that despite the fact that “ceasefires have never been more urgent, and over the past year have offered respite to some areas in Syria,” they “also come at a great cost to civilians, and the use of aid access as a bargaining chip is of serious concern.” Oxfam called on the international community – the U.S. and Russia in particular – to more actively ensure that armed groups honor ceasefire agreements, and adhere to their stated goals and promote a broadening of humanitarian access and freedom of movement. The report also recommends that “civilians, the UN and civil society organizations are meaningfully involved in the negotiations of ceasefires.”¹⁵

10 Rim Turkmani et al. “Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria.” *London School of Economics*, October 2014. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/PDF/Syriareport.pdf>.

11 Ibid.

12 See footnote 44, here page 8.

13 PAX, The Syria Institute. “First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria.” *Siege Watch*, February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

14 Ibid.

15 Oxfam International et al. “Fuelling the Fire: How the UN Security Council’s Permanent Members are Undermining their own Commitments in Syria”, 11 March 2016.

4 Case Studies

4.1 Zabadani

Background

Zabadani is a small, verdant town west of Damascus and close to the Lebanese border, with a pre-war population of about 50,000. Although its local economy relied heavily on tourism, fruit harvesting, and strong economic linkages with the capital, it was also a well-known smuggling route between Syria and Lebanon, and reportedly a main supply point for the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.¹⁶ Zabadani was one of the early hot spots of the war, and one of the first areas to experience an attempt at a local ceasefire.¹⁷ Opposition forces occupied the town on January 18th, 2012, but in the face of heavy government shelling, preliminary ceasefire negotiations began as early as January 20th. The government had begun to attempt to consolidate control of the area and reached out to opposition strongholds to discuss the terms of their potential withdrawal.¹⁸ Residents involved in early negotiations stated that the loss of life and absence of basic supplies compelled them to accept the government's entreaties to negotiate,¹⁹ though expectations of forging a successful agreement at the time were extremely low.²⁰

Negotiation Dynamics

With heavy input and involvement by Asif Shawkat, the now-deceased Deputy Minister of Defense,²¹ the government agreed to cease direct attacks against the city, remove most of its checkpoints, and end the practice of arbitrary detentions. In exchange, opposition groups would remove their own checkpoints and cease attacks on military installations and convoys, and the government would be given unimpeded access to the Ain El-Fijeh springs nearby, a vital water source in the area.²²

A reconciliation committee was formed to broker the terms of the agreement, largely consisting of "middle ground" individuals, who were unaffiliated with either camp or had a loyalty to a particular faction but a reputation for working with the "other side."²³ The committees included Ba'ath party officials, local civil servants, members of the local administration council, and military figures. Many individuals close to the process claim that influential members of this reconciliation committee were smugglers with connections to the military, friends in the civil service, and significant connections on both sides.²⁴

The brokered *hudna* was short-lived, however. Within ten days, government forces opened fire on opposition fighters, leading to a series of reciprocal escalations from both sides. By the beginning of February 2012, the first government siege around Zabadani was already in effect, with pronounced shortages of food, heating fuel, and other basic supplies, while government bombardments of the town escalated.²⁵

16 Institute for the Study of War. "Syria's Armed Opposition." *Middle East Security Report*, March 2012, page 25.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Interview with teacher involved in the negotiations.

20 Interview with journalist covering the negotiations and interview with doctor indirectly involved in the negotiations.

21 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the process.

22 Interview with journalist covering the negotiations.

23 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the process.

24 For example, interview with external civil society activist involved in the process.

25 Associated Press. "U.S. Floats Coalition Against Syria." *CBS*, 5 Feb 2012.

A second ceasefire agreement was signed by mid-February 2012, allowing opposition fighters the opportunity to surrender their weapons and evacuate the city.²⁶ To placate the government, local women apparently purchased a number of light weapons and distributed them to civilians in the town, to “surrender” them to government officials.²⁷ The plan was uncovered by government agents, the agreement fell apart, and government forces settled in for a besiegement that would persist unchallenged for much of the next two years.

In August 2014, as Hezbollah ramped up its offensive on the Qalamoun plateau, opposition armed groups coalesced under the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham, one of the largest military factions, to form the United Army of Zabadani in a coordinated attempt to break the siege, with significant fighting but little direct success.²⁸ Perhaps in direct response, government intermediaries communicating through the reconciliation committee of neighboring Bloudan proposed a new 40-day ceasefire.²⁹

However, numerous security incidents on both sides – car bombs, government shelling, barrel bombs etc. – continued to undermine the talks. Finally, citing the ongoing aerial bombardment of Zabadani and nearby opposition-held areas, opposition forces officially rejected the offer, and planned a counter-offensive that by December had significantly eased the government encirclement of Zabadani.³⁰ Within seven months, however, government forces bolstered by Hezbollah victories in Qalamoun had captured the main road linking Zabadani with the town of Madaya, which had become the de-facto resettlement point for civilians escaping the violence in Zabadani.³¹ Government forces tightened the siege and commenced an accelerated campaign of aerial bombardment.³²

Several opposition figures from the area commented that the Hezbollah victory was a turning point in their negotiations with the government, as Iranian influence solidified the government’s position and reduced their willingness to compromise.³³ Local notables within the area’s reconciliation committees were facilitating secret negotiations between government and opposition forces.³⁴ Meanwhile, opposition groups operating under the Jaysh Al-Fateh umbrella encircled and began shelling the predominantly Shi’a towns of Foua and Kafraya, in the northeast of Idleb governorate. Under the bombardment of up to 1000 shells per day, residents of the towns faced acute shortages of food, water, electricity, and other basic necessities.

With the input of both Iran and Turkey, a 48-hour ceasefire was brokered to encompass both the government siege of Zabadani and the opposition sieges of Foua and Kafraya, but further talks were stymied by Iranian insistence that civilians around Zabadani, Foua, and Kafraya be resettled according to their religious identity.³⁵ Iranian officials participating in the negotiations pushed for a total population resettlement to repopulate the emptied area in Qusayr with the besieged Shi’a populations in Foua and Kafraya.³⁶ Spokesmen for Ahrar Al-Sham publicly rejected the “sectarian expulsion agenda” of the Iranian brokers.³⁷ Another attempted negotiation at the end of August also fell apart within three days, when government officials rejected an Ahrar Al-Sham demand to release 1,500 female detainees as a gesture of good faith.³⁸

26 “Assad’s Forces Enter Zabadani After Ceasefire.” *Reuters*, 11 Feb 2012.

27 Interview with community activist formerly resident in Zabadani.

28 Al-Haj, Mustafa. “Regime, Rebels Continue Clashes in Zabadani.” *Al-Monitor*, 8 Sep 2014.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Kozak, Christopher. “An Army in All Corners: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria.” *Institute for the Study of War*, April 2015. <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%201.pdf>.

31 Al-Haj, Mustafa. “Regime, Rebels Continue Clashes in Zabadani.” *Al-Monitor*, 8 Sep 2014.

32 “اهوي 11 لال خ ارجفتتم اليمرب 470 ب ينادبزل ا فصقوي دسالا”

33 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the process.

34 Al-Haj, Mustafa. “Regime, Rebels Continue Clashes in Zabadani.” *Al-Monitor*, 8 Sep 2014.

35 Karouny, Mariam and Tom Perry. “Turkey, Iran Help Broker Rare Truce in Syria.” *Reuters*, 12 Aug 2015.

36 Interview with resident of Madaya.

37 Hamou, Ammar, and Maria Nelson. “Another Zabadani Ceasefire as Negotiations Continue with Iran.” *Syria:direct*, 27 August 2015. <http://syriadirect.org/news/another-zabadani-ceasefire-as-negotiations-continue-with-iran/>.

38 “Syria Ceasefire Breaks Down in Three Areas, Monitor Says.” *Agence France-Presse*, 29 August 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/29/syria-ceasefire-breaks-down-in-three-areas-monitor-says>.

Obstacles to Agreement

Both sides of the negotiation faced a number of constraints, often self-imposed. Negotiations on the opposition side were almost entirely conducted through the political office of Ahrar Al-Sham and their local leaders, despite the fact that the group was now technically operating within the larger Jaysh Al-Fateh military coalition.³⁹ Coordination between Ahrar Al-Sham officials and other Jaysh Al-Fateh members was poor, leading to frequent miscommunication and unmet expectations.⁴⁰ On the government side, many claim that the Iranian officials were purposely delaying the negotiations in the hopes that a broader Hezbollah victory could encompass Zabadani as well, negating the need for any compromise at all.⁴¹

There was also disagreement between various factions within the Syrian government. Several individuals close to the process reported that representatives of the 4th Armored Division, the elite internal security branch of the military, were significantly less inclined to negotiate than members of other security and intelligence divisions, often purposely slowing the process to a crawl to keep a final settlement out of reach.⁴²

The failure to reach a final agreement in this round of negotiations led to large-scale population displacement in the area. Civilians were evacuated from the active military zone of Zabadani to the nearby town of Madaya, an opposition-controlled city that was also under siege, as well as government-controlled neighboring towns of Bloudan and Maamura. The overwhelming majority of the evacuees were sent to Madaya, and the government besiegement of a civilian area was described as a counterweight to the opposition sieges of Foua and Kafraya.⁴³ An uneasy six months of relative calm followed, where threats by either side could be countered by pressure on the civilians besieged by their opponents.⁴⁴ For example, an escalation of government military activity around Zabadani would often precipitate the shelling of Foua and Kafraya, and vice versa. Even the government's notorious use of barrel-bombs was effectively halted in large swaths of the Idlib governorate covered by the ceasefire, but regardless of the calm, a final agreement never seemed within reach.⁴⁵

By September 2015, the balance of influence on the government side had shifted in favor of Russia. A worsening humanitarian crisis in Madaya hastened a UN effort to deliver humanitarian supplies to Zabadani through Damascus, and Foua and Kafraya via Turkey. Now directly involved in the Zabadani situation, Russian foreign ministry officials began to encourage a settlement, with significant resistance from Iranian officials also present.⁴⁶ Some individuals claimed that Hezbollah fighters would strategically instigate clashes to prevent mediators from convening. As one interviewee described it, "Russians have influence through their air power, but the Iranians have ground power."⁴⁷

Final Negotiations

In December 2015, possibly as a result of the growing influence of Russia, and a renewed interest in using local ceasefires as a starting-point for a national-level peace process, the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE) directly brokered a ceasefire deal. It allowed opposition fighters to withdraw from Zabadani along with their light weapons, in exchange for the evacuation of civilians in Foua and Kafraya, to be incrementally completed over the course of the following six months.⁴⁸ In addition, humanitarian assistance would be

39 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the negotiations.

40 Ibid.

41 Interview with journalist covering the negotiations.

42 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the negotiations.

43 Interview with external activist involved in the negotiations.

44 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the negotiations.

45 Interview with doctor indirectly involved in the negotiations.

46 Interview with external civil society activist involved in the negotiations.

47 Ibid.

48 "Syria Army, Rebels Reach Deal on Zabadani, Idlib Villages: Source." *Reuters*, 24 September 2015. <http://www.dailystar.com>.

allowed into Zabadani and the surrounding communities, the siege would be lifted, and a mutually agreed-upon list of detainees would be released.⁴⁹ This cessation of hostilities also extended to nearby towns around each locale, such as the opposition stronghold of Binnij near Foua. The agreement also stipulated that pro-government media outlets would be allowed to enter the city, and that the government flag would be flown over government buildings.⁵⁰

True to the agreement, the first withdrawal of wounded fighters in Zabadani began by the end of the month, and by the 29th of December, civilians in Foua and Kafraya were making their way south to Damascus, while wounded fighters in Zabadani travelled to Beirut and on to Turkey.⁵¹

Aftermath

The Syrian army's grip on the towns of Zabadani and Wadi Barada, and other surrounding villages, while not lifted, eased considerably as a result of the relative peace in the area. Locals reported increased access to many basic supplies, significantly lower prices, and the return of displaced persons to some of the villages.⁵² Marketplaces and small shops have re-opened in Wadi Barada, and government employees have returned to work both in their local towns and commuting to Damascus. However, freedom of movement both within and around the area remains highly restricted, and reconstruction has not taken place due to the absence of any construction materials.⁵³

Only about 500 people remain in Zabadani. The neighboring city of Madaya has not fared as well as a consequence of the ceasefire. Home to most of the displaced civilians in the area, Madaya is estimated to host more than 40,000 people (as at February 2016), and has been subjected to a siege so stringent that local residents have reportedly resorted to eating grass, leaves, and even pets to stave off their hunger.⁵⁴ Doctors Without Borders reports that approximately 46 people have died from starvation since December 2015.⁵⁵ A humanitarian intervention was hastily organized in January 2016, following the international outcry that emerged after the circulation of pictures of starving children in Madaya. The intervention was coupled with aid deliveries to Foua and Kafraya, but the besiegement of all three areas remained firmly in place as of early May.⁵⁶ Three months after the humanitarian intervention, Madaya residents are once again reporting levels of malnutrition nearing starvation. Minefields surrounding Madaya have made it all but impossible to smuggle food and other necessities into the city.⁵⁷

Residents of nearby Wadi Barada have mixed responses regarding the levels of violence as of early 2016. Though government shelling, once omnipresent in the area, has effectively come to a halt,⁵⁸ many inhabitants report a sudden rise in targeted assassinations and kidnappings attributed to personal conflicts, score-settling, and political infighting.⁵⁹ Personal animosities and retributions have become a frighteningly common occurrence throughout the area as well.⁶⁰ Many see this as a direct and inevitable

lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Sep-24/316543-hezbollah-syria-army-reach-deal-with-rebels-on-fate-of-zabadani-idlib-towns-sources.ashx.

49 Interview with journalist covering the negotiations.

50 Ibid.

51 Evacuees Arrive in Damascus in Rare Syria Deal." *Agence France-Presse*, 29 December 2015. <http://news.yahoo.com/evacuees-arrive-damascus-rare-syria-deal-103935622.html>.

52 Interview with doctor directly involved in the negotiations.

53 Interview with teacher not involved in the negotiations.

54 PAX, The Syria Institute. "First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria." *Siege Watch*, February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

55 "Madaya: 'Another 16 starve to death' in besieged Syrian town." *BBC*, 30 January 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35449107>.

56 PAX, The Syria Institute. "First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria." *Siege Watch*, February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

57 Oxfam International et al. "Fuelling the Fire: How the UN Security Council's Permanent Members are Undermining their own Commitments in Syria." 11 March 2016.

58 Interview with resident in the area.

59 Interview with doctor indirectly involved in the negotiations.

60 Interview with media activist in Wadi Barada.

effect of the ceasefire itself, as shifting power dynamics allow old animosities to resurface, in a context with easily accessible weapons and limited policing authority.⁶¹ Another factor is also at play: spoilers or armed groups who have been excluded from negotiated agreements may be switching to asymmetrical tactics against enemies that have shifted their own focus toward policing and governance.⁶² This transformation is also evident in other examples discussed below.

4.2 Al-Waar

Background

Al-Waar is a medium-sized modern town in the Homs governorate, consisting of eight residential areas called *jaziras* (islands). The population of Al-Waar swelled from approximately 50,000 prior to the conflict to approximately 300,000 as a result of massive displacement from nearby regions.⁶³ It is predominantly populated by Sunni Muslims, though some areas have significant concentrations of Shi'a and other Alawite populations, and some enclaves of Palestinians.⁶⁴

Al-Waar sits adjacent to the Old City of Homs, known among pro-opposition groups as the “heart of the revolution” due to early protests that took place in the city at the start of the uprising. The Old City was subject to a separate (though often overlapping) ceasefire agreement in mid-2014, leading to the evacuation of the city even while opposition fighters remained battling in Al-Waar.

Negotiation Dynamics

Al-Waar was first besieged by Syrian government forces in mid-October 2013.⁶⁵ After approximately six months of encirclement in which freedom of movement was largely restricted to students and civil servants,⁶⁶ the first ceasefire talks began in earnest, with the intention of securing safe access for fighters in Al-Waar to evacuate to the north.⁶⁷ Residents claim that opposition forces were pressured to negotiate by the inhabitants of Al-Waar, who feared the economic and humanitarian effects of a prolonged siege.⁶⁸ The government side was represented by a security committee consisting of the intelligence agencies of the air force, military, political bureau, and the governor's office.⁶⁹ A former UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria was also involved in facilitating talks at a later stage.⁷⁰

In October 2014, opposition forces in Al-Waar launched an offensive against the Seventh Island (*Al-Jazira Al-Sabi'a*), displacing a number of Shi'a families in the process and precipitating a new round of negotiations, which included the Homs Local Council.⁷¹ An agreement was reached in which opposition armed forces

61 Interview with resident in the area.

62 Interview with journalist covering the negotiations.

63 PAX, The Syria Institute. “First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria.” *Siege Watch*. February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

64 Interview with nurse living in the area.

65 “Syria: Escalating Assault on Rebel-Held District.” *Human Rights Watch*. 23 December 2014. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/23/syria-escalating-assault-rebel-held-district>.

66 Ibid.

67 “Syria Rebels, Army Agree on Truce Near Key City.” *Associated Press*. 25 May 2014. <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/region/syria-rebels-army-agree-truce-near-key-city>.

68 Ibid.

69 Interview with external civil society activist from Al-Waar.

70 al-Haj, Mustafa. “What are the Real Goals behind Local Truces in Syria?” *Al-Monitor*. Trans. Sami-Joe Abboud. 13 January 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/syria-truce-regime-opposition-al-waer.html>.

71 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

would withdraw from the areas they had gained in their latest offensive, cease military operations in the areas around Al-Waar, and reopen government institutions within the city. In response, the government promised to re-open access routes to the city and end its campaign of shelling and bombardment.⁷²

As in the case of Zabadani, however, the issue of population transfers stymied the implementation of the agreement. Government resettlement of families in Mazra'a and Raqqa, predominantly Shi'a and Alawite towns west of Homs,⁷³ raised suspicions by opposition groups that the government was either trying to change the demographic profile of the area, or provide safe havens for Hezbollah advancement; the conflict soon escalated back to open fighting.⁷⁴

A subsequent attempt was also quickly scuttled. Local residents claim that pro-government groups in Mazra'a purposely sabotaged the deal in order to safeguard the income they received from checkpoints and smuggling operations.⁷⁵ The issue of economic incentives to maintain the fighting arose with regularity during interviews with residents of Al-Waar.⁷⁶

Over time, offers of reconciliation continued to emerge from the government side, with increasingly harsh terms for the opposition.⁷⁷ By the end of 2014, government officials offered to end the siege in exchange for the interrogation of 200 fighters, the surrendering of light arms, and the formation of "popular committees" to act as local militias to maintain the peace in Al-Waar.⁷⁸ Requests by opposition negotiators to receive humanitarian deliveries as a gesture of good faith were rebuffed, leading to a collapse in the talks, and a resumption of fighting that continued unabated until the evacuation of the Old City of Homs.⁷⁹

Following the evacuation of opposition forces from the Old City of Homs, Syrian government representatives resumed negotiations with the fighters in Al-Waar, under the aegis of Iranian officials. Conditions were even more stringent than before: all fighters were to be interrogated by government officials, who would arrest or release each individual as they saw fit.⁸⁰ After this offer was rejected out of hand, negotiators from both sides settled for a temporary cessation of hostilities pending final negotiations, which was maintained with few interruptions until the end of the year.

In early January 2015, the Russian government had begun to take an interest in local ceasefires, citing the evacuation of the Old City of Homs as a model for future negotiations.⁸¹ At the same time, and partly in coordination with Russian officials, UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura met with the negotiation committee in the Old City of Homs, in what was described by one individual present as "a very good meeting."⁸² Days after the meeting, some humanitarian convoys were allowed access to the area. Activists close to the negotiations said that the Special Envoy's Office did not follow-up with the negotiating committee as attention turned toward "freezing" the Aleppo battlefronts.⁸³

One member of the negotiating committee also cited the launch of Western military strikes as a further complicating factor.⁸⁴ Believing that US airstrikes would significantly strengthen their military position, opposition forces felt less pressure to negotiate, while the government representatives became more suspicious of the process as the result of perceived western support.

72 Interview with member of Waar negotiating team.

73 "Syria: Escalating Assault on Rebel-Held District." *Human Rights Watch*. 23 December 2014. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/23/syria-escalating-assault-rebel-held-district>.

74 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

75 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

76 For example, interview with academic familiar with negotiations.

77 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

78 "Two Major Explosions Rip Through Syrian City of Homs." *Al-Jazeera*. 28 December 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/major-explosions-rip-syrian-city-homs-151228101947464.html>.

79 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

80 Interview with external civil society activist from the area.

81 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

82 Interview with member of the negotiating committee.

83 "In Syria, desperate residents see little hope in U.N. Aleppo truce plan." *Reuters*. 27 November 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-aleppo-idUSKCN0JB1LM20141127>.

84 Interview with member of the negotiating committee.

Obstacles to Agreement

By mid-January 2015, in the face of diminishing prospects for an agreement, several opposition armed groups produced a joint statement affirming their commitment to safeguard the delivery of humanitarian assistance if it would be provided to the area, while members of the negotiating committee contacted Russian officials directly to ask for their support in brokering an agreement.⁸⁵

Later that month, an anti-government attack in Aqrama was conducted by militias trying to maintain the state of conflict, but was quickly condemned by mainstream opposition groups in Al-Waar. To counteract the effect of this attack, talks and reciprocating gestures of good faith intensified throughout the remainder of January.⁸⁶ By the end of the month, the Russian government was reviewing a draft plan for a reconstituted political order in Al-Waar, using components of Law 107, the “Decentralization Law,” to build semi-autonomous local structures to maintain the peace.

In February, the negotiating committee of Al-Waar was invited to Damascus to meet with government officials led by General Security Directorate chief Deeb Zeitoun, ostensibly as the result of Russian encouragement.⁸⁷ At the meeting, some specifics of a potential ceasefire arrangement were discussed, such as the facilitation of humanitarian aid, the release of detainees, and the surrender of heavy weaponry,⁸⁸ but the committee stalled in discussions on the appropriate monitoring body for the ceasefire’s implementation.⁸⁹ A joint Iranian and Russian delegation was suggested, but details of the opening of an Iranian monitoring office within Al-Waar caused resistance that prevented it from taking place.⁹⁰

Following a televised interview on a pro-government station, the negotiating committee once again met with officials in Damascus to discuss the details of a framework. The broad outline of the plan involved the evacuation of opposition fighters in Al-Waar to opposition strongholds in the north, but disagreements emerged on the disarming of the fighters.⁹¹ Some participants claimed that the Russian intermediaries pushed for the fighters to retain their arms, while the government staunchly opposed the idea.⁹² The following day, however, fierce fighting broke out once again in the neighborhood of Al-Jazira Al-Sabia, this time at the hands of the pro-government militias ostensibly backed by Iran, which objected to the terms of the ceasefire.⁹³

Progress was once again made during preparations for the Syrian opposition conference in April 2015 in Moscow. A monitoring committee was proposed with members of civil society organizations and UN representatives to ensure the proper implementation of a potential final agreement.⁹⁴ In reality however, in the lead-up to the Moscow conference, negotiators could not agree on the final parameters of either the monitoring committee or the agreement itself. During the official meetings, the topic of Al-Waar was postponed indefinitely.⁹⁵ Government representative Bashar Al-Jaafari, however, did discuss the issue with opposition representatives in Moscow off the record.⁹⁶ He promised support in pushing a final agreement but offered nothing concrete.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

⁸⁷ Interview with external civil society activist from the area.

⁸⁸ Interview with member of Waar negotiating team.

⁸⁹ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Interview with member of Waar negotiating team.

⁹² Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

⁹³ Interview with member of Waar negotiating team.

⁹⁴ Interview with member of the negotiating committee.

⁹⁵ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Final Negotiations

Following the announcement of the Vienna negotiations in October 2015, the Syrian government redeveloped interest in solving the issue of Al-Waar. A new framework was drafted with similar parameters as the final agreement in the Old City of Homs, with slightly more generous terms for the opposition. The agreement was to be implemented in three distinct stages. In the first, a general cessation of hostilities would come into effect, allowing for humanitarian actors to enter the area and distribute assistance. Roads would also be opened on a provisional basis to light traffic, and opposition groups would draft a list of detainees both for the purposes of suggesting their release and inquiring about their status. In the second stage, the opposition's medium and heavy weaponry would be collected into a common storage area that would be jointly administered by both parties, road access would be further opened, IDPs would be returned to the neighborhood, and select detainees identified in the first stage would be released. The opposition would also be expected to present maps of all smuggling tunnels and minefields in the area (with few exceptions). In the third and final stage, the general disarmament would be finalized, roads would be fully reopened, and a final administrative solution would be determined for the contested areas of Al-Basateen and Al-Jazira Al-Sabi'a.⁹⁷

The first stage of the ceasefire implementation proceeded true to form. 270 fighters, mostly from Jabhat Al-Nusra, were allowed to evacuate with small arms to the Idleb countryside, along with their families.⁹⁸ Some humanitarian assistance was provided, though less than many residents expected, and also a list of 7,365 detainees was prepared. The clear military defeat it represented was difficult to accept for some members of the opposition, who expressed dismay that those years of fighting and besiegement had accomplished so little.⁹⁹

Aftermath

Humanitarian convoys began to enter Al-Waar on December 12th, 2015. Only a week later, many Al-Waar residents announced that despite government pressure, they would not leave, citing an unwillingness to allow the government to force out Al-Waar's original inhabitants and replace them with more "loyal" populations.¹⁰⁰ Their staunch refusal to be relocated surprised the Syrian government. Following this refusal, further government plans for population transfer in Al-Waar appear to have ceased.

Living conditions in Al-Waar improved considerably since the agreement went into effect. Residents report lower prices, more access to basic goods, and greater freedom of movement through the Mohandeseen passage,¹⁰¹ though mobility restrictions remain largely in place.¹⁰² Some residents report feeling safe again, with one respondent saying she "no longer sees fear in the eyes of children."¹⁰³ Displaced persons have not been able to return, however, and hostility remains high between the Sunni majority and ethnic minority groups perceived as pro-Assad.¹⁰⁴

Over the past year, however, at least six bombings have taken place in or around Al-Waar, particularly in the historically pro-government Shia-majority area of Zahraa.¹⁰⁵ The government claims the attacks are being

⁹⁷ Interview with member of Waar negotiating team.

⁹⁸ Al-Haj, Mustafa. "What are the Real Goals behind Local Truces in Syria?" *Al-Monitor*, Trans. Sami-Joe Abboud, 13 January 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/syria-truce-regime-opposition-al-waar.html>.

⁹⁹ Interview with university lecturer from the area.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Haj, Mustafa. "What are the Real Goals behind Local Truces in Syria?" *Al-Monitor*, Trans. Sami-Joe Abboud, 13 January 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/syria-truce-regime-opposition-al-waar.html>; Abu Zeid, Osama; Wilkofsky, Dan. "Waar: Fighters will not leave. Neighborhood to retain 'revolutionary character.'" *Syria Direct*, 10 December 2015. <http://syriadirect.org/news/waar-fighters-will-not-leave-neighborhood-to-retain-%E2%80%98revolutionary-character%E2%80%99/>.

¹⁰¹ Interview with civil defense worker in the area.

¹⁰² Interview with teacher in the area.

¹⁰³ Interview with nurse living in the area.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Haj Ali, Mohammed, "Pro-regime reporter in Homs city: 'No confidence' in security." *Syria Direct*, 28 January 2016. <http://syriadirect.org/news/pro-regime-reporter-in-homs-city-%E2%80%98no-confidence%E2%80%99-in-security>.

perpetrated by ISIS militants, but many town residents suspect “semi-autonomous Shi’a militias” that are still trying to disrupt the ceasefire. Though there are few documented cases of ostensibly pro-government militias attacking government forces, residents point to clashes in Zahraa in April 2015 between the Syrian Army and the pro-government National Defense Forces.¹⁰⁶ These attacks have caused many locals to question the capabilities of the governor and the security officials in charge of the area, and at least one military opposition group (Kata’ib al-Huda al-Islamiyya) has used the occasion of the killings to renounce its willingness to abide by the terms of the ceasefire.¹⁰⁷ In mid-January 2016 opposition forces also shut the Mohandeseen passage, the only means of entering and exiting Al-Waar, though it was reopened several days later.¹⁰⁸

In March 2016, delays in implementation of the second phase of the agreement have led to renewed rumors within Al-Waar of a potential collapse of the agreement. Despite previous assurances to release detainees based on the three-stage agreement, government representatives stated that of the 7,365 names put forward, it would only release 137. Officials also claimed that the closure of the Mohandeseen passage would be imminent, and reportedly shut off electricity for most of the area.¹⁰⁹ Several military opposition groups in the area are reportedly prepared for a renewal of hostilities, and weapons collection and storage attempts have effectively been halted.¹¹⁰

4.3 Yalda, Babila, and Beit Sahim

Background

Yalda, Babila, and Beit Sahim are all adjacent neighborhoods in the southern outskirts of Damascus, often considered part of the Rural Damascus governorate but technically part of Damascus city. The pre-war population in the three towns was no more than a few thousand inhabitants. They are part of a small cluster of suburbs that includes a number of key strategic locations for various actors in the Syrian conflict.

For one, Yalda is considered a main access point to Yarmouk, a densely populated Palestinian “camp” that has assumed great strategic importance in the course of the conflict. Yarmouk contains a number of Palestinian militias who are variously characterized as pro-government, pro-opposition, or hardline religious extremist, yet it is hard to lump them exclusively into these three categories.¹¹¹ As such, many negotiations of ceasefires in Yalda, Babila, and other towns are reflective of the evolving strategic situation in Yarmouk.¹¹²

Furthermore, Sayida Zeynab lies directly to the southwest, a Shi’a-majority area which as of summer 2016 is still being used as a base of operations for both Hezbollah and Iranian forces.¹¹³ Several inhabitants report that the area has been a key recruiting and training ground for pro-government militias, who have frequently clashed with opposition forces in Yalda and Babila.¹¹⁴

106 Abu Zeid, Osama; Wilkofsky, Dan. “Tensions escalate between Syrian army, NDF in Homs city.” *Syria Direct*, 30 April 2015. <http://syriadirect.org/news/tensions-escalate-between-syrian-army-ndf-in-homs-city>.

107 Ibid.

108 Abu Zeid, Osama; Nelson, Maria. “Rebel negotiator: Waer truce ‘about to go up in flames.’” *Syria Direct*, 10 January 2016. <http://syriadirect.org/news/rebel-negotiator-waer-truce-%E2%80%98about-to-go-up-in-flames%E2%80%99>.

109 Abu Zeid, Osama; Wilkofsky, Dan. “Waer truce headed toward ‘collapse’ as dispute over detainees intensifies.” *Syria Direct*, 10 March 2016. <http://syriadirect.org/news/waer-truce-headed-toward-%E2%80%98collapse%E2%80%99-as-dispute-over-detainees-intensifies>.

110 Ibid.

111 Since mid-2016, Yarmouk has been brought under exclusive military control of ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra.

112 PAX, The Syria Institute. “First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria.” *Siege Watch*, February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

113 Ibid.; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi. “Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi: A Syrian Hezbollah Formation.” *Syria Comment*, 23 July 2016. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-al-imam-al-mahdi-syrian-hezbollah-formation/>.

114 Interview with media activist in Yalda.

Lastly, the area is also home to the largest concentration of ISIS militants in southern Syria, who were ostensibly forced into the area after retreating from government offenses further to the south.

The area has been contested since the beginning of military clashes, but in late 2013, the government retook several opposition-controlled towns to the south, beginning a multi-year siege of the Yalda/Babila/Beit Sahim neighborhoods.

Negotiation Dynamics

Discussions around ceasefire agreements first arose in early 2014, with terms similar to ceasefires in other areas: a cessation of hostilities, surrendering opposition heavy weaponry, lifting the siege, opening the area for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and raising the Syrian government flag in the areas.¹¹⁵

The negotiations are said to have lasted no longer than two hours.¹¹⁶ Fighters arriving to the presidential palace in central Damascus were described as tired, wounded, and hungry, eager to end the fighting and return to some sense of normalcy. The government agreed to give these local opposition groups a certain degree of autonomy to operate within their area, so long as they maintained order and prevented any attacks against government forces. One negotiator acknowledged being “overwhelmed” by the bargaining position of the government negotiators, but tried to maximize concessions for his constituents nevertheless.¹¹⁷

The negotiations stipulated a trial phase, in which border restrictions were eased slightly, and a small amount of aid was admitted to the area. By the end of February, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent announced aid distributions for Yalda, Babila, and Beit Sahim,¹¹⁸ and by the end of March, government intermediaries promised to allow free civilian access between the three towns. After these trust-building measures were fulfilled with no conflict or mitigating issues, the negotiations expanded into discussions of a more long-term settlement.¹¹⁹ The government aimed to fly their flag, admit government media to the area, and detain certain members of opposition forces.¹²⁰

Despite a relative easing of relations with the government, the area was soon wracked by divisions between opposition and ISIS or ISIS-affiliated groups. After ISIS launched a series of attacks and detained several Jaysh Al-Islam commanders, an opposition counter-offensive pushed ISIS battalions out of most Yalda positions.¹²¹ In September, ISIS and opposition forces attempted to overcome their differences and signed a non-aggression pact to focus their collective energies on fighting the government.¹²² The agreement, which was the first documented truce between opposition forces and ISIS, held for approximately three months.¹²³

By December 2014, the reconciliation committee composed of local notables, military leaders, and other prominent figures representing Yalda, Babila, and Beit Sahim signed a second phase of the agreement with government representatives, which called not only for the normalization of relations between the government and the local councils of the area, but committed opposition groups in that area to the fight against “radical groups” such as ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra.¹²⁴

¹¹⁵ “Syrian Army, Rebels Agree New Damascus Area Truce.” *Al-Akhbar*, 17 February 2014. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18674>.

¹¹⁶ Wood, Paul. “War-weariness Key to Ending Fight Over Homs.” *BBC News*, 8 May 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27329727>.

¹¹⁷ Interview with member of Yalda negotiating committee.

¹¹⁸ al-Abed, Tareq. “Clashes Escalate on Syria’s Southern Front.” *Assafir*, Trans. Pascale Menassa, 26 February 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/syria-southern-front-escalation-clashes-damascus.html>.

¹¹⁹ “Syria Direct: News Update 3-27-2014.” *Syria Direct*. 27 March 2014. <http://syriadirect.org/news/syria-direct-news-update-3-27-2014/>.

¹²⁰ Interview with member of Yalda negotiating committee.

¹²¹ Kozak, Chris. “The Islamic State Eyes Expansion in Damascus.” *Institute for the Study of War*, 20 January 2015. <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/search?q=yalda>.

¹²² Agence France Presse, “ISIS, Syria rebel group sign pact of ‘non-aggression.’” *Al Arabiya English*, 13 September 2014. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/13/ISIS-signs-non-aggression-pact-with-Syrian-group.html>.

¹²³ “Damascus Rebel Leader Urges Truce with Regime.” *Zaman al-Wasl*, 8 December 2014. <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28267/Damascus+Rebel+Leader+Urges+Truce+With+Regime>.

¹²⁴ “Damascus Rebel Leader Urges Truce with Regime.” *Zaman al-Wasl*, 8 December 2014. <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28267/Damascus+Rebel+Leader+Urges+Truce+With+Regime>.

Obstacles to Agreement

Unlike the cases presented above, the negotiations in Yalda took place so rapidly that many of the complicating factors present in Zabadani and Al-Waar did not emerge until after the signing of the agreement. As a consequence, even as relations with the Syrian government normalized, the lack of agreement between opposition groups led to intensified fighting between the opposition signatories and more hardline groups. Over the following months, opposition factions such as Jaysh Al-Islam and Sham Al-Rasoul battled Nusra and ISIS forces for control of the area.¹²⁵ As of April 2016, clashes between opposition forces and ISIS were still occurring with regularity. At that time residents reported that the primary source of violence was in these clashes, while direct confrontations with the government effectively transformed into cooperation with government forces to subdue spoilers on both sides.

In October 2015, Jaysh Al-Islam fighters – apparently operating without commands from superior officers – stormed a courthouse and killed six men suspected for working as ISIS collaborators.¹²⁶ The ensuing flare-up threatened to collapse the fragile balance of power between armed groups, local councils, and independent judiciary offices working in the area, but even as court officials condemned the “extra-judicial killings,” they also reinforced the importance of defeating radical elements in the area, thereby implicitly sanctioning the continuing violence.¹²⁷

However, even as opposition forces have pushed back their radical counterparts, the conflict has taken on an increasingly asymmetric style. Several ISIS tunnels have been discovered linking the adjacent neighborhood of Hajar Al-Aswad with Yalda, which are used to circumvent formal front lines and force Jaysh Al-Islam to divert resources to their interior.¹²⁸ In addition, as in Al-Waar, pro-government militias have shelled Yalda on a number of occasions, an act that residents suspect is an attempt to undermine the ceasefire and resume direct hostilities.¹²⁹ Security concerns regarding “extremist violence” have risen to the forefront of resident concerns.¹³⁰

Aftermath

Since late 2014, checkpoints manned jointly by opposition and government forces control much of the traffic in and around the area, with few reported incidents of violence.¹³¹ Opposition fighters who operate these checkpoints reported that relations with their government counterparts are limited and terse, and that the cordiality afforded at these checkpoints does not extend to other areas of contact.¹³²

The ceasefire has also led to an increase in humanitarian access, a reduction of the prices of basic commodities, and the return of some IDPs.¹³³ Freedom of movement has improved markedly but remains difficult.¹³⁴ Yalda has also become the key access point for international assistance to reach Yarmouk, still classified as besieged by the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).¹³⁵ In February 2016, UN OCHA in collaboration with the Syrian government delivered food and other assistance

¹²⁵ Ciezadlo, Annia. “A Garden Grows Amid the Daily Dangers of a Siege in Syria.” *Al-Jazeera*, 18 May 2015. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/18/a-garden-grows-amid-a-siege-in-syria.html>.

¹²⁶ Nelson, Maria; Hamou, Ammar. “Jaish al-Islam leadership tested after fighters mete out vigilante justice.” *Syria Direct*, 5 October 2015. <http://syriadirect.org/news/jaish-al-islam-leadership-tested-after-fighters-mete-out-vigilante-justice/>.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Hourani, Noura; Nelson, Maria. “Jaish al-Islam: Islamic State looking to expand beyond south Damascus stronghold.” *Syria Direct*, 15 March 2016. <http://syriadirect.org/news/jaish-al-islam-islamic-state-looking-to-expand-beyond-south-damascus-stronghold/>.

¹²⁹ Interview with teacher in Babila.

¹³⁰ Interview with member of the Yalda negotiation committee.

¹³¹ Interview with opposition fighter in Yalda.

¹³² Interview with opposition fighter in Babila.

¹³³ Interview with teacher in Babila.

¹³⁴ Interview with teacher in Yalda.

¹³⁵ PAX, The Syria Institute. “First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria.” *Siege Watch*, February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

to several thousand families in the area, citing food security as the largest concern facing residents in the region. Every two months, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivers assistance to Yalda and surrounding cities. The extent to which this assistance was provided to residents in ceasefire areas (Yalda, Babila, Beit Sahim) is unclear, however, since Yalda remains the single access point for the residents of Yarmouk, where the humanitarian situation is far worse.¹³⁶ Residents claim the quantities provided are insufficient, and much is later smuggled from Yalda into Yarmouk.

Despite the increase in humanitarian aid, other aspects of the agreement, such as the restoration of all basic services, health support, and freedom of movement within and around the area, have yet to be honored by the government. Residents have little hope that these concessions will be granted in the near future.¹³⁷ The head of the negotiating committee in Yalda, Sheikh Saleh Al-Khatib, maintains contact with Damascus, but the remainder of the committee no longer meets.¹³⁸

4.4 Eastern Ghouta

Background

Eastern Ghouta is a large agricultural and suburban area in the Rural Damascus governorate, consisting of dozens of small to medium-sized cities and expansive farmland. The pre-war population of Eastern Ghouta was over 500,000, and consisted largely of rural and semi-rural inhabitants.¹³⁹ Protests against the Syrian government started rather early in Eastern Ghouta, at the end of March 2011.¹⁴⁰ By September of that year, army defectors had established the Abu Obeida Bin Jarah Brigade to protect demonstrators, but within two months, major fighting had broken out between the brigade and government forces in Eastern Ghouta.¹⁴¹

By mid-2012, the Islam Brigade (later renamed Jaysh Al-Islam), led by Zahran Alloush, was gaining prominence as a formidable opposition militia.¹⁴² Shortly after their attack on the National Security Office in Damascus, the government siege of Eastern Ghouta began to take shape.¹⁴³ Throughout late 2012 and early 2013, government forces methodically closed crossings into and out of the area, completely encircling it by mid-2013.

Although fighting in Eastern Ghouta was limited to skirmishes along the periphery of the siege lines, government forces regularly shelled all areas within the territory. In August 2013, Ghouta was subjected to the first verified chemical attack at the hands of government forces. The use of chemical weapons prompted a massive public outcry, a UN investigation, and escalating threats of international intervention, but the situation on the ground remained effectively unchanged.¹⁴⁴ International action failed to materialize, and battle lines remained largely as they were before. Three months later, a massive opposition push to break the siege resulted in hundreds of deaths but failed to loosen the government's grip.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Interview with reconciliation committee member in Yalda.

¹³⁸ Interview with member of the Yalda negotiation committee.

¹³⁹ Gutman, Roy, and Mousab Alhamadee. "Damascus Suburb Hit by Poison Gas Remains Cut Off, Besieged." *McClatchy DC*, 12 June 2015. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24785680.html>.

¹⁴⁰ "Left to Die Under Siege: War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Eastern Ghouta." London: Amnesty International, 2015. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/mde2420792015english.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Lund, Aron. "A Dispute in Douma." *Syria in Crisis*, 24 October 2013. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53432>.

¹⁴³ Suqi, Firas. "Syria's Bucket Children Desperate for Aid." *Al-Jazeera*, 10 November 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/11/syria-bucket-children-desperate-aid-201411911445557565.html>.

¹⁴⁴ *Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013*. United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, 13 September 2013. http://www.un.org/disarmament/content/slideshow/Secretary_General_Report_of_CW_Investigation.pdf.

¹⁴⁵ Solomon, Erika. "Scores Killed as Rebels Battle to Break Siege of Damascus Suburbs." *Reuters*, 24 November 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-damascus-siege-idUSBRE9AN09420131124>.

Negotiation Dynamics

In January of 2014, the government had started to negotiate in earnest to de-escalate key flashpoints in Rural Damascus with local ceasefires, to bolster security around the capital and reprioritize military forces to battles in the North.¹⁴⁶ Though little progress was made in Eastern Ghouta itself, several surrounding areas, including the nearby town of Barzeh, signed agreements stipulating an end to the fighting, some autonomous control for opposition militias, and the open access of goods into and out of the area.¹⁴⁷

These surrounding ceasefires, particularly in Barzeh, had significant effects on conditions in Ghouta, as smuggling tunnels connecting the two points provided a primary source of goods and supplies for civilians and armed groups alike.¹⁴⁸ At least four primary tunnels are operating in Ghouta, each controlled by one of the major armed groups operating in the area, including Jabhat Al-Nusra, Fajr Al Ummah, and Jaysh Al-Islam.¹⁴⁹ The access afforded by these tunnels has reduced the prices of goods, though significant price inflation still persists.

Within Ghouta itself, systems of local governance appear to be functioning at a capacity unmatched in most other areas of Syria.¹⁵⁰ The Local Council is regarded as capable and well respected, with a skilled and hard-working medical office. Civil society has flourished in Ghouta, with a proliferation of NGOs and relief groups, working to alleviate the worst effects of the siege and bombardments.

Part of the reason for the relative stability in Ghouta may be due to the area's social homogeneity; as a consequence of the early onset of the siege, most residents are originally from the area, in stark contrast to the large displaced populations in northern towns and cities.¹⁵¹

By February 2014, the UN had begun to explicitly advocate for an end to the besiegement of Eastern Ghouta. On February 22nd, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2139, which called for the end of sieges and access for humanitarian actors, mentioning Ghouta by name in section 5.¹⁵² However, by the summer, the siege of Ghouta had only tightened, as the government retook key positions in the towns of Mleha and Adra.¹⁵³

Obstacles to Agreement

Advocates of a ceasefire in the area argued that as the site of the government's likely chemical attack, Ghouta held significant symbolic power for the Syrian government and the opposition and a successful end to the violence there could have wide-reaching ramifications across Syria.¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, several inhabitants believe that some sort of unwritten agreement or understanding has been reached between the Syrian government and local opposition forces.¹⁵⁵ The stability of the area seems to imply a certain comfort on both sides in maintaining the status quo. Many cite the rarity of government attacks on opposition military positions in the city – even when civilian areas are heavily bombarded – as further proof of such an arrangement.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

¹⁴⁷ PAX, The Syria Institute. "First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria." *Siege Watch*, February 2016. <http://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations

¹⁴⁹ Sadaki, Youssef. "The Siege Economy of Eastern Ghouta." *Atlantic Council*, 23 March 2016. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-siege-economy-of-eastern-ghouta>.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Local Coordination Committee member in Douma.

¹⁵¹ Interview with agricultural engineer in Douma.

¹⁵² "Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2139 (2014) to Ease Aid Delivery to Syrians, Provide Relief from 'Chilling Darkness.'" United Nations Press Office, 22 February 2014. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11292.doc.htm>.

¹⁵³ "'Left to Die Under Siege:' War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Eastern Ghouta." London: Amnesty International, 2015. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/mde2420792015english.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Relief Office member.

Furthermore, the extremely lucrative checkpoints between Ghouta and Damascus – and the inflated pieces of smuggled goods within Ghouta – provided numerous military and political actors on both sides with strong financial incentives to keep the siege firmly in place.¹⁵⁶ (Ghouta is also home to the so-called “Million Checkpoint,” which ostensibly earns a million dollars a day in checkpoint fees and tariffs. Other checkpoints and tunnels are known to be similarly lucrative, and many inhabitants of the area claim that opposition and government officials have actively worked to keep these revenue sources untouched.¹⁵⁷)

Ghouta is also the locus of a great deal of international assistance. Western donor agencies and Arabian Gulf benefactors have spent millions on stabilization and governance projects in the area, including but not limited to water and waste management projects, health and hospital assistance, electrical rehabilitation, Wi-Fi networks, and school support. Gulf support to Eastern Ghouta often takes the form of cash, smuggled in large quantities through the tunnels to local councils and various military groups. Critics claim that both government and opposition leaders are happy to let this influx of foreign resources continue, adding yet another incentive to maintain the status quo.¹⁵⁸

Several attempts have been made – mostly at the insistence of local civil society groups – to negotiate a final agreement. The first few were initiated by local doctors and medical groups, overwhelmed with the civilian toll of the siege and bombardments.¹⁵⁹ Residents reported that these individuals put significant pressure on local armed groups to end hostilities, but were ultimately unsuccessful in persuading any key decision-makers.¹⁶⁰

On multiple occasions, a group of doctors representing local civil society and the Civil Society Coalition “Tamas” sent formal letters of appeal to the Office of Special Envoy, but no response was received. At the Moscow II negotiations (see page 18), attempts to highlight the siege of Ghouta were rebuffed by the Russian mediators.

In February 2015, a civil society coalition in Eastern Ghouta prepared a letter requesting humanitarian assistance.¹⁶¹ It highlighted both the need to relieve the pressing shortage of basic goods, but also the ability of such assistance to drive down local prices and correspondingly reduce incentives to maintain the siege. The letter was distributed to the UN Security Council, the Office of the Special Envoy, OCHA, and the Syrian government.¹⁶²

On the eve of the Vienna negotiations, groups in Ghouta switched tracks and began to appeal to the Russian government to support a local ceasefire. One individual mentioned that after he witnessed what happened in the Zabadani negotiations, he believed that Russian intermediaries proved themselves to be far more amenable than their Iranian counterparts, and felt encouraged to reach out to them.¹⁶³

Talks began between a local doctor and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov. The doctor argued that Ghouta would be a good entry point for the Vienna negotiations, and claimed that Bogdanov seemed receptive to the idea.¹⁶⁴

156 Rim Turkmani, A. K. Ali, Mary Kaldor and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic. “Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria.” London School of Economics, 30 July 2015. <http://www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Countering-war-economy-Syria2.pdf>.

157 Ibid.

158 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

159 Interview with physician involved in the “enough blood” campaign.

160 Ibid.

161 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

162 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

163 Interview with physician involved in the “enough blood” campaign.

164 Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

Final Attempt

Within a few months, several local groups reported that Zahran Alloush had reached out to them to “ensure that they would be represented in his peace negotiations with the Russians.”¹⁶⁵ Alloush claimed to want to speak on behalf of all the people of Ghouta, and many religious figures in the area were surprisingly quick to change their sermons to suit this new interest in securing peace. Many believe that this rapid turnaround was a direct consequence of civil society entreaties to Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov.¹⁶⁶

However, many groups also felt that Alloush did not, or could not, represent their interests in negotiations, and tried to involve themselves more directly in the process. 120 civil society organizations met to elect a 20-member political committee to represent them in the talks, and the Islamic Union and Ahrar Al-Sham also demanded direct participation.¹⁶⁷ These groups were effective for a time in undermining Alloush’s attempt to monopolize the negotiation process. Jabhat Al-Nusra, meanwhile, rejected the proposition of the negotiations outright.¹⁶⁸ During these talks, locals reported a significant reduction in violence, and an improving economic situation within the area.¹⁶⁹

Limbo

On December 25th, Zahran Alloush was killed in an airstrike, ending the latest round of negotiations abruptly. Several local inhabitants claimed that the assassination was a Russian retribution for Alloush’s recent order to shell the Russian embassy in Damascus.¹⁷⁰

As of early February 2016, no significant new negotiations emerged, at least as far as local civilian groups have been able to perceive. With broader negotiations under consideration in Geneva, few residents are optimistic that a local solution would be forthcoming.¹⁷¹

Despite this bleak outlook, many residents outlined a common set of expectations for future negotiations, should they ever occur. Firstly, a number of interviewees mentioned that it was very likely that Jaysh Al-Islam would have to play a central role in the talks, as the predominant armed group in Eastern Ghouta. At the same time, however, several residents expressed concern that if other armed groups were left out of the talks, as has been the case in previous iterations, they could act as spoilers or otherwise undermine the deal. Several pointed to the ceasefire in Yalda as an example of what can be achieved. The assessment is often pessimistic but rational. “The truce in Southern Damascus has been violated by the Syrian regime,” said one resident, “but it’s still better than no truce at all.”¹⁷²

More concerning to most interviewees, however, are the continued economic opportunities accruing to those perpetuating the siege.¹⁷³ In May 2016, widespread resentment concerning the perceived enrichment and entitlement of Jaysh Al-Islam led several other opposition groups to join together under the banners of Jaysh Al-Fustat and Failaq Al-Rahman to challenge Jaysh Al-Islam’s control of Eastern Ghouta. A truce was announced in mid-May, but government advances in the interim period led to the capture of the agricultural area of Marj, Eastern Ghouta’s breadbasket.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Abdallah Suleiman Ali. “Ghouta on edge over talk of reconciliation with regime.” *Al-Monitor*, 2 February, 2015.

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/02/tension-high-ghouta-damascus-factions-infighting.html#ixzz45rC29Thn>

¹⁶⁸ Interview with fighter operating in the area.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Local Coordination Committee member in Douma.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

¹⁷¹ Interview with field physician operating in the area.

¹⁷² Interview with teacher in Douma.

¹⁷³ Interview with media activist.

¹⁷⁴ a-Noufal et al. “East Ghouta loses its breadbasket: ‘The regime exploited the ongoing infighting’” *Syria Direct*, May 19 2016.

<http://syriadirect.org/news/east-ghouta-loses-its-breadbasket-%E2%80%98the-regime-exploited-the-ongoing-infighting%E2%80%99/>.

5 Observations and Findings

The ceasefires that have been attempted across Syria since 2012 arose from a variety of circumstances, each bearing its own contextual idiosyncrasies and trajectories. However, analyzing the case studies described above, several points of commonality emerge. They allow for a mapping of influential actors and dynamics at the local level and, in turn, lend insights into opportunities and challenges for building a conflict resolution approach that combines bottom-up and top-down strategies.

1. Key actors to the conflict each have salient impacts on local dynamics of violence and reconciliation

Across the areas studied, the following set of actors appeared as particularly able to influence ceasefire negotiations and the manner in which agreements are organized:

- 1) *Reconciliation committees* – In each of the case studies presented above, reconciliation committees played a key role in establishing linkages between government and opposition forces, and in developing the negotiation frameworks under which agreements could be established. Often composed of local notables with strong economic networks in and around their communities, these committees have extensive ties to select parties to the conflict and a strong inclination for a resolution of hostilities. Often disparaged by local groups as Assad loyalists or war profiteers aiming to strengthen their business networks, the existence and role of reconciliation committees continues to be a contentious and multi-faceted aspect of local ceasefire negotiation processes.
- 2) *Anti-Government Armed Forces* – Local members of armed groups have consistently been at the forefront of local ceasefire negotiations, often tasked not only with setting the broader parameters of negotiation, but also enforcing the implementation of the agreement. Though negotiations conducted by these groups are often ostensibly cast as representing a broad coalition of groups, one or two particularly powerful groups in each of the areas tends to wield far more power and influence in the proceedings, often creating resentment or frustration in the ranks of under-represented groups.
- 3) *Government and loyalist forces* – In addition to Syrian army forces engaged in hostilities around the areas discussed below, a number of Syrian intelligence and security branches are frequently present as well, often acting as government negotiators. In particular, representatives from intelligence bureaus of the various military branches, as well as the political intelligence office played a key role in both the dynamics of the localized conflicts and in setting the parameters of the agreements. The government's Office of National Reconciliation, as well as local government functionaries such as provincial governors were also involved.
- 4) *External actors* – Regional and global powers also played a role in negotiation processes. In particular, Iranian and Russian intermediaries were frequently involved on the government side, while Turkey represented opposition interests in Zabadani and in other ceasefire negotiations as well. The United Nations, particularly through the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), has also been involved in several ceasefire negotiations, for example in Zabadani and the Old City of Homs. Western and Gulf powers have thus far maintained a more hands-off (or perhaps back-room) approach to the formation and consolidation of local ceasefires.

2. Economic incentives have shaped the scope and impact of local deals

Local actors can be deeply affected by the distortions created in a siege economy. Opposition and pro-government armed groups in particular seem to have strong incentives to maintain a state of siege, whether they are the besiegers or the besieged. Checkpoints, security fees, and smuggling profits have provided significant income to armed forces that otherwise often rely on the largesse of international backers of both the government and the opposition to finance weapons procurement and pay salaries to fighters. The economic incentives of reconciliation committee members have played an outsized role in the course of negotiations. The varying levels of besiegement that remain in place in each of the ceasefires analyzed above are a testament to the power of these often-overlooked economic motivations.

Tackling these incentives head-on has proven to be particularly challenging, but several techniques have been tried in various contexts. For one, the leveraging of higher authorities within these groups, or the involvement of international actors in the mediation process, reduces the importance of individual actors on the ground and allows for less space for local profiteering. The cost of this is of course that the negotiators may be less familiar with local dynamics and as a consequence may not forge effective or fair agreements. This has certainly been the case in both Zabadani and Al-Waar, where international intervention circumvented the ability for local groups to derail the outcome, but at immense cost to local inhabitants.

Furthermore, in both of these cases, it should be noted that even as the ceasefires have held, the sieges remain largely in place. Beyond the strategic calculations involved in continuing to restrict access to opposition hotspots, this is clearly a testament to the lasting economic incentives for armed groups on both sides of the siege line, and the primacy of the economic lever in creating a sustainable outcome.

An alternative is to attempt a restructuring of the local economy to reduce the appeal of smuggling and security. In Ghouta, for example, local groups attempted on several occasions to increase international assistance to the area, partly based on the premise that an influx of goods would drive down prices and reduce the power of the smugglers. However, the failure of most of these attempts proves the power wielded by those who wish to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, it is clear that any sustainable solution will have to tackle this issue at some point – at both the local and national levels –, in order to move the process forward from a simple cessation of hostilities to start a more sustainable peacebuilding and conflict-transformation effort.

3. Local notables have played a pivotal yet controversial role in local negotiation processes

Members of reconciliation committees in each of the areas researched share a certain demographic suited to their required function; they are prominent individuals who can draw on a variety of contacts both around and within the besieged areas. A common perception of these people is that they are “smugglers” or at least beneficiaries of the smuggling economy, drawing on their economic networks to push their agenda. To the extent that this is true, it gives these individuals a complex set of mixed incentives, wherein they are expected to work to end the restrictions that are largely responsible for their present economic success: an end to the siege would correspondingly mean an end to the need for smuggling. This was a particularly poignant issue in Ghouta, where many blamed the failed reconciliation attempts on spoilers who preferred to keep their lucrative smuggling networks in place.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this duality also seems to complicate the relationship of these reconciliation committee members with the rest of the community. Some derivation of the phrase “hated but necessary” was used in no fewer than three interviews, implying that the authority that these committees enjoy may be more coerced than earned. This could have serious long-term implications on the continued viability of the arrangements put in place by these committees, should the individuals that constitute them lose the social capital they have amassed.

Organizing ceasefires for broader swathes of territory will likely reduce – but not eliminate – the importance of these individuals. Even if their ability to derive political or economic power from the process is reduced, however, the question remains of how local components of a national ceasefire will be structured and enforced. The question of who can command the legitimacy required from all sides to effectively police the ceasefire has yet to be answered at the national level, and these local committees may be a promising starting point.

On the other hand, the ability to formulate and police the early stages of the agreement does not necessarily translate into a capability to manage later, more involved stages of a peace process. If talks move into areas of demobilization, reconstruction, and the establishment of new systems of governance, more legitimate and capable actors may need to be identified and trained.

4. External actors have catalyzed ceasefire efforts but often at the expense of local priorities

International mediators have been involved at varying degrees in many of the aforementioned negotiations across the four reported areas. The processes of ceasefire negotiations have typically progressed through three or four distinct chronological phases, each of which moved closer to agreement, often times depending on the involvement of external actors:

1) *Direct talks* – Many of these negotiations were initiated and conducted locally, through local reconciliation committees working directly with armed opposition groups and government security officials. In most cases, these talks faltered relatively quickly, easily disrupted by spoilers on either side who wished to maintain the status quo.

2) *Iranian involvement* – Iranian officials became involved in later-stage negotiations in Zabadani, Al-Waar, and Ghouta. In each of these circumstances, external involvement largely served to solidify hardline positions within the government, reducing the appeal of the agreements to opposition groups, and decreasing the likelihood of acceptance. Although such strategies are at least partly undertaken in an effort to secure control of key transfer points for Iranian weapons sent to support Hezbollah in Lebanon, the public perception of large-scale ethnic relocation has been overwhelmingly negative. This not only resulted in significant human cost in the course of the transitions, but also set a bad precedent for future negotiations in which opposition officials were wary of similar occurrences in the areas they controlled.

3) *Russian involvement* – Though Russian support for the Syrian government has been no less committed than that of their Iranian counterpart, their involvement in ceasefire negotiations has been significantly more effective. By pushing the involved actors to compromise, and adding humanitarian components, Russian mediators in several cases succeeded where all previous efforts have failed. It is a clear mark of their capability that a number of opposition figures – many of whom hold the Russian government directly accountable for killing their comrades in air strikes in the North – spoke quite favorably of the role Russia played in their local negotiations. As mentioned previously, however, the Iranian government maintains a far more robust ground presence, and as such still plays an outsized role in influencing decision-making in Damascus.

4) *UN involvement* – The ceasefire cases above all evince relatively limited, albeit inconsistent levels of UN engagement in participating in local ceasefire processes.¹⁷⁵ Between late 2014 and early 2015 the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy focused its attention primarily on the initiative to secure a freeze in fighting in Aleppo, which perhaps diverted attention away from other areas where civil society and other middle ground actors were attempting to leverage UN involvement to secure deals that had been in process for longer periods such as in Al-Waar and Eastern Ghouta.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with external civil society activist familiar with the negotiations.

In retrospect, this may have been a lost opportunity, leading to an expanded role of the Russian government at the expense of the broader international community. The problem was further compounded by late-stage UN involvement in the implementation of ceasefire agreements, such as in Zabadani, made without their participation or oversight. As a consequence, some Syrians interviewed expressed the perception that the UN was complicit in the population transfer or “ethnic recomposition” of ceasefire areas.

This has clear implications for the attempts, as of mid-2016, at a national-level cessation of hostilities. Unless international backers fulfill a role of applying and/or exerting direct pressure for negotiations and meaningful concessions – at the same time resisting the infusion of their own strategic interests into the process – it is unlikely that local forces will adhere to external expectations with little bearing on conditions on the ground.

5. Civil society, despite strong connections and capabilities on the ground, has been largely excluded from ceasefire negotiation processes

Although the ceasefire agreements are generally made between opposition military forces on one side, and government security services on the other, civil society has consistently played a significant role in the negotiation processes, both as a vital link between the two sides, and often as a voice for the needs and expectations of the local communities in the areas under consideration. In Ghouta, for example, civil society groups, including assemblies of local medical personnel, have been primary agents for an end to the violence, while military groups on both sides seem to have had little incentive to loosen the siege or end the fighting, given the financial benefits they derive from the status quo.

In 2014-15 and early 2016, civil society groups were in frequent contact with the UN and key, accessible external states to promote ceasefire negotiations in their communities. Activists have conveyed that these entreaties often included detailed proposals that urged strong agreements, including mechanisms for stabilization.¹⁷⁶

Research shows, and the Syrian experience thus far proves that for a national-level ceasefire to hold, civil society groups represent the best possible option for neutral arbiters at the ground-level to maintain peace and communicate concerns across political and social divides.¹⁷⁷ As such, attempts to involve civilian groups in peace negotiations are a decisive step in that direction.

However, many other groups – particularly those affiliated with the opposition – feel sidelined and marginalized in the process, as made evident in a war of words following an internationally-sponsored civil society meeting in London in early 2016. Marginalizing these groups will undermine the willingness of civilian influencers in opposition-held areas to uphold the terms of any future arrangement, and as such, more must be done to bring them into the fold.

6. The specter of sectarian population exchange has undermined existing arrangements and reduced the appetite for new agreements

The sectarian redistribution that formed part of the negotiations in both Al-Waar and Zabadani is perhaps the most disturbing effect of ceasefire arrangements. In many ways echoing the sectarian divisions that took place during the civil war in post-occupation Iraq, government forces seem to be using ceasefire negotiations to relocate “friendly” populations into areas emptied of inhabitants such as Qusayr, in order to consolidate government power and protect its interests in both Syria and Lebanon. This has deeply

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Michelle Barsa, Olivia Holt-Ivry, Allison Muehlenbeck. “Inclusive Ceasefires: Women, gender, and a Sustainable End to Violence.” *Inclusive Security*, March 2016; Rim Turkmani et al. “Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria.” London School of Economics, October 2014. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/PDF/Syriareport.pdf>.

troubling implications for Syria's survival as a pluralistic, multi-ethnic nation, and previously mixed populations become sharply divided. However, these forced population transfers are not necessarily endemic to the ceasefire process.

These transfers have also soured public perceptions of government-promoted ceasefires, reducing the desirability of such negotiations in new contexts. Following the migrations that followed agreements in Homs and Zabadani, inhabitants of many other besieged areas now also had reason to fear the consequences of ceasefires. Further population displacement in the North at the hands of advancing Kurdish militias only further amplifies the fears of many Sunni Arab families of being driven from their homes, which has immensely reduced their appetite for ceasefire agreements.

Furthermore, given the massive scale of displacement that has taken place over the course of the past five years, a sustainable national-level ceasefire is likely to result in unprecedented migration flows as IDPs either return to their homes or relocate to new communities. The way this process will be managed will have repercussions for decades to come.

7. The presence of spoilers and the limited scope of ceasefire deals have transformed rather than ended violence

Although the ostensible goal of ceasefire arrangements is to secure an end to the violence, this has not always been an observed consequence of the negotiation processes in Syria. In some areas, such as Al-Waar, violence has indeed abated, or decreased markedly. In others, however, the reduction of violence between the government and the opposition has opened new fault lines between opposition militias, particularly between the "moderate" opposition forces, and more hardline groups like ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra.

This is particularly the case when parties to the negotiations exclude key players in the area. There seems to be a temptation from government negotiators, and negotiation committees, to identify the most willing interlocutors from the opposition side. However, this often perverts the incentives of excluded actors who are then impelled to play the role of spoilers. As all examples above demonstrate, talks are easily derailed by fostering instability, as bombings or attacks have stopped several rounds of negotiations. Although this has frequently been done at the hands of more hardline opposition groups, pro-government militias are guilty of similar acts of malfeasance, often for similar reasons. It should also be noted that, as in the case of Eastern Ghouta, this type of violence can even emerge in the absence of a negotiated agreement, where the consolidation of power by Jaysh Al-Islam created similar conditions for out-groups as the other case studies described.

Alternatively, agreements which allow opposition forces to retain de facto control over their areas of operation have also forced them to "police" these areas, igniting new conflicts with hardline groups that had previously formed a united front against the government. As ceasefire arrangements necessarily realign "moderate" elements from each side against hardline "spoilers," this type of violence is likely to grow in proportion to the success of ceasefire arrangements, and can be equally damaging to local populations. Current attempts in 2016 at broader ceasefires have explicitly left out hardline groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS. As such, a similar redirection of violence toward and between these groups is a likely consequence of any successfully sustained ceasefire agreement, and care should be given toward how such violence may affect local stability and civilian populations in areas in which these groups operate.

6 Conclusion

Local ceasefires in Syria have succeeded in shifting conflict dynamics in a context of an overall protracted political stalemate. In some cases this has included material benefits in terms of curtailing military attacks, increasing humanitarian access, and promoting shared governance mechanisms of both civilian and military bodies. The ceasefires have not, however, produced more broadly applicable or sustainable conflict transformation potential that would justify a peacebuilding strategy around piecemeal deal making.

The National Cessation of Hostilities negotiated between the US and Russia and endorsed by the ISSG and UNSC in early 2016 was effective in freezing the military conflict between the government and “moderate” opposition, including stopping aerial bombardments. Such an overarching de-escalation framework backed by international consensus is pivotally important for saving lives and creating conditions conducive for more sustainable conflict resolution. Nevertheless, as also discussed here, the multi-layered, multi-actor and location-specific dimensions to the Syrian conflict, combined with the untapped power of civil society inside Syria, suggests that any national-level agreement will be equally unsustainable if unaccompanied by inclusive localized arrangements that tackle the influence of economic incentives favoring conflict systems, the potential for external interference, and the precarious imbalance between militarized factions and civil society.

Multi-tiered strategies backed by international institutions that link national and local conflict transformation approaches are needed. International involvement by Russia in particular has provided significant leverage against more hardline Iranian positions, local paramilitary and extremist opposition groups, and other spoilers. UN involvement, to the limited extent that it has been present and engaged at the ground level, has been important for mitigating both Russian and Iranian influence and providing a platform for the discussion of civilian needs. Such international leveraging may be important for enabling more sustainable localized deals, but more systematic international engagement is needed to produce local arrangements that can contend with the structural dimensions of the conflict and transformation opportunities manifesting at the local level. These efforts should be done in line with national-level political efforts. Such an approach would build on the strengths of existing local-level and national-level approaches, while mitigating some of their worst effects in the process.

7 Areas of Opportunity

Given that external actors wield overwhelming power in terms of reaching a sustainable national ceasefire umbrella agreement, this section draws on the observations and findings above to highlight suggested areas for further consideration by decision-makers at the international level. Syrian actors would necessarily play a significant role in shaping and implementing any international de-escalation agreement. More dialogue with key national influencers is needed to develop actionable transformative approaches linking the national and local arrangements, including along the lines suggested below.

Other than the studies referenced in Section 3, some well-informed UN staff on the ground, and this research itself, surprisingly little knowledge exists at the international level about the dynamics of these local level processes. More in-depth studies are needed to produce robust conclusions about underlying causal mechanisms of ceasefires and other mechanisms leading to de-escalation. Further studies should also seek to ascertain community perspectives from a more diverse population set, in order to close the methodological gap whereby opposition perspectives or those of people living in opposition-held areas are more readily available and accounted for in analysis of ground dynamics and opportunities.

The UN could explore taking a more active and consistent role in the inception of local ceasefire arrangements, to ensure even-handed and legitimate compromises, components that encourage the development of locally representative civilian rule, and effective measures for the de-escalation of violence. Its involvement should be institutionally consistent, with clear follow through and transparent rules of engagement, linked closely with transnational civil society networks with a strong presence inside the targeted areas. Actor maps and knowledge gained from such engagement should help to formulate more inclusive strategies for de-escalation and eventual stabilization, and build the reputation of the UN as a fair interlocutor in the peace process. Leverage gained from these local processes should feed into top-down national-level negotiations by building trust between government and opposition groups, establishing sustainable frameworks for de-escalation, and strategically leveraging national-level actions to promote local-level advancements. Even in the absence of tangible national-level processes, more robust local arrangements can provide the necessary local legitimation and potential foundational frameworks for any future process that arises.

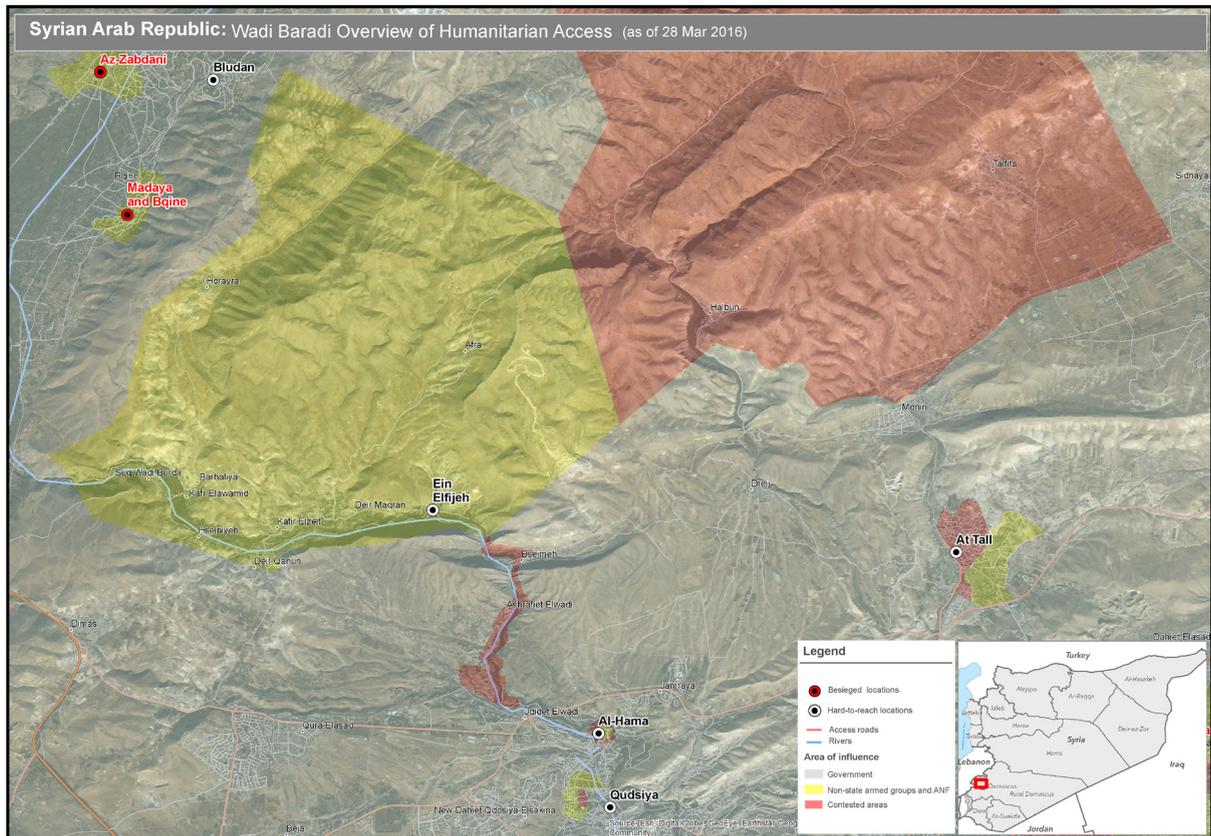
The International Syria Support Group may secure an internationally endorsed national cessation of hostilities that synthesizes and builds upon nascent and pre-existing local arrangements and includes structural incentives for conflict mitigation and built-in compliance monitoring mechanisms. Such an attempt would be more robust against the vulnerabilities exposed by the attempted national cessation of hostilities of early 2016, by leveraging the strengths of local arrangements rather than potentially overriding them. A national-level process that builds up around these local arrangements would also undercut one of the primary weaknesses of previous local-level processes, namely the transformation of violence to other conflict areas or toward competing intra-group bodies.

Donor states could work with Syrian humanitarian and civil society groups to strategize policies for combatting the war economy in areas where access to a diversity of actors is more readily available, as well as enabling more space and capacity for civilian leadership in localized de-escalation measures. International assistance is essential to the survival of countless Syrians suffering extreme humanitarian deprivations. While maintaining – or increasing – aid, more exploration should be given to the ways in which donor assistance can avoid reinforcing systems of violence and intransigence, particularly with regard to besieged areas and the distribution of fungible commodities. One clear avenue forward may be to focus, where possible, on stabilization and development activities that revitalize local civilian economies, restore the delivery of basic services, and promote local actors that can better advocate for peace and justice.

This study, among others, provides initial groundwork upon which ideas for more holistic peacebuilding strategies may be designed, promoted and ultimately secured. The end of the conflict in Syria may still be out of sight, but the brief respite provided by the National Cessation of Hostilities was perhaps the first glimmer of what a successful de-escalation might actually look like. To build such a process in a truly sustainable fashion, however, much work must be done in the interim to expand knowledge of local dynamics, the underlying motivations and expectations of involved parties, and the means by which local mechanisms can be strengthened and scaled up to provide more robust support to future conflict cessation initiatives.

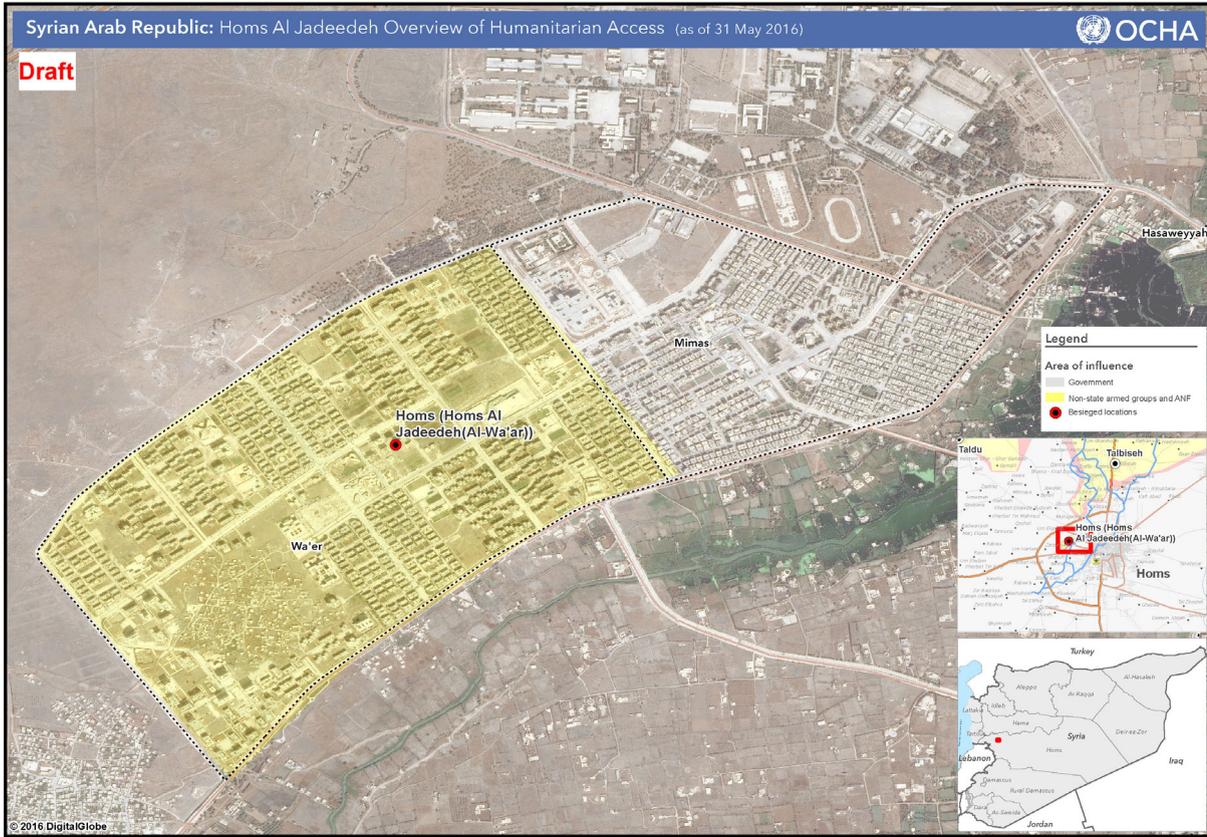
Appendix: Maps

Case Study: Zababdani



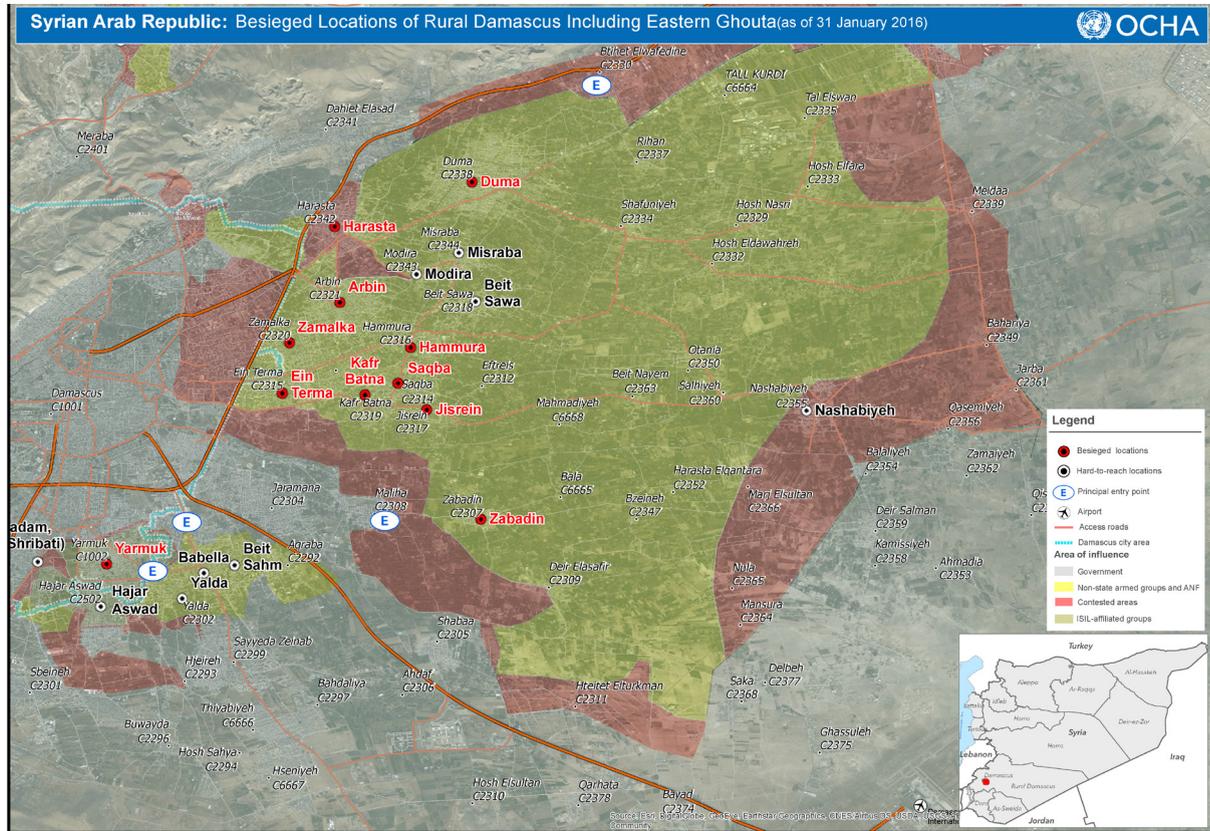
Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 2016

Case Study: Al-Waar



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 2016

Case Studies: Yalda and Babila, Eastern Ghouta



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 2016



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