

Daraa Province and the De-Escalation Zones Agreement

June 20, 2018

After recent developments in Homs and Damascus countryside, Daraa province is now in the spotlight as the next site to experience the same type of forced displacement that had previously taken place in the aforementioned areas. These areas were all included in the Astana de-escalation zones agreement, signed by Russia, Turkey and Iran - the three guarantor states.

This report sheds light on field developments in the province and monitors the humanitarian situation following the military campaign that began on June 18, 2018.

Introduction:

After the Syrian government imposed its control, through military force as well as forced displacement, on Eastern Ghouta, southern Damascus, Qalamun, and the Homs countryside - all of which were included in the de-escalation zones agreement - the government began to mobilize its forces towards Daraa province. Threatening messages were sent about storming the areas controlled by opposition armed groups. In the meantime, Russia attempts to circumvent the agreement and is sending messages to the opposition armed groups in southern Daraa to comply with "reconciliations". Otherwise, they will face the military campaign the Syrian government will wage against the province.

Areas of control in Daraa province:

For more than a year, Daraa has witnessed a state of complete calm on all fronts, except for the Yarmouk basin, where ISIS is concentrated.

Both the opposition armed groups and the Syrian government share control of the province, and there are small areas where ISIS is located.

- The opposition armed groups control two areas, in the east and west, linked by the al-Harbi Road. The eastern area extends from the border of the town of al-Masmiyya, northeast of Daraa, to the city of Daraa al-Balad. The western area extends from the Triangle of Death area, northwest of Daraa, to the town of Tal Shihab, southwest of Daraa.
- The Syrian government forces and its militias are spread over various areas; from the eastern border (Suweida province) and the northeastern border (the town of al-Masmiyya), passing through the towns of Izra, Kherbet Ghazala, Sheikh Miskine, the eastern part of Da'el - in the center of the province - Atman and Daraa Station. They also control areas in the Triangle of Death area, northwest of the province.
- ISIS is located in the southwest of the province, on the Jordanian-Palestinian border, up to the borders of the city of Nawa, in the north.

Field developments:

- The Syrian government began to mobilize its forces on April 20, 2018, on several axes in Busra al-Harir, Lajat and Suweida, as well as in the Triangle of Death area, near Kafr Shams. It has also set forth a military convoy on the motorway leading to the Naseeb Crossing.
- The progress towards the areas held by opposition armed groups began on June 18, 2018, along the towns of Busra al-Harir and Lajat.
- Syrian government forces have launched artillery and rockets on the towns of the province; on Daraa City (an opposition armed group held area), Kafr Nasij, al-Harra, Busra Esh-Sham, al-Ghariyah al-Gharbiyah, areas surrounding the 52nd Brigade, Lajat, Asem, Jadal, al-Bustan, Tal al-Mal, Tal Sheikh Hussein, Nahtheh, Rakham, Naima, Busra al-Harir and Um Walad. In addition, The following roads were targeted:
 - The Old Customs Road.
 - The road connecting the towns of al-Karak al-Sharqi and al-Musayfirah.
 - The road between Kafr Nasij and al-Mal.
- Warplanes have targeted the towns of Lajat and Msika with cluster rockets.

Opposition armed groups have responded with the following:

- Opposition armed groups have bombed the military convoy on the motorway leading to the Naseeb Crossing. They have also clashed with Syrian government forces on the outskirts of Daraa al-Balad
- In the town of Daraa Station, the opposition armed groups targeted both the security block, the security branches and fortifications of the Syrian government forces with mortars and heavy artillery.
- In the town of Lajat, the opposition armed groups launched a counter attack on Syrian government forces, which have advanced to the air defense battalion east of Msika.
- Syrian government forces and its militias were targeted with mortars in the towns of Harran and Lobein, leading to a fire in the Harran school in which they were located.
- They also targeted the northern checkpoint in Kherbet Ghazala with artillery and killed a number of officers affiliated with the Syrian government.
- There were intermittent clashes in the towns of Manshiya, Daraa Station and Um Walad, while violent clashes took place on the outskirts of the air defense battalion, east of Lajat.
- Opposition armed groups have made several announcements since the outset of the military campaign:
 - They declared the Daraa-Damascus highway a military zone.
 - They cancelled the Wednesday market in the town of al-Harra, and prevented gatherings in public squares and places threatened by shelling.
 - They declared the town of Samas and its surroundings a military zone.
 - Opposition armed groups also claimed responsibility for shelling Suweida province.
- On the other side, the opposition armed groups targeted an ISIS-held area, in Lajat, with mortars. This led to the death of Imad al-Sabti, an ISIS officer (or 'emir'), as well as a number of fighters. In addition, ISIS were targeted with artillery in the vicinity of the town of Hitt.

Humanitarian Situation:

- Civilians began to flee from the Triangle of Death area (Kafr Shams and Nasij) toward Quneitra province. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) were accommodated in the governorate's schools.

- Civilians have also moved from the towns of Busra al-Harir, Msika and Jadal to neighboring towns, as a result of intensive shelling.
- A limited number of civilians have been displaced from Daraa City, as well as al-Sadd and al-Balad neighborhoods, towards the province's eastern countryside.
- The towns in Daraa province held by opposition armed groups are witnessing an almost complete cut-off of electricity, telephone landlines as well as drinking water, forcing people to buy well water.
- There is a significant shortage of food and fuel, as well as a severe shortage of baby milk and infant formula. These have run out in all hospitals located in the areas held by opposition armed groups.
- In addition, field hospitals suffer from severe shortages of medicines and equipment.
- Areas held by opposition armed groups are witnessing an increase in prices for all materials and supplies, as well as for house rentals.
- A Syrian government checkpoint in the town of Kherbet Ghazala has prevented the exit of civilians whose births were registered in Daraa as indicated in their identity cards, pushing them towards other areas.

Recommendations:

There is a state of anticipation and fear of the expanding military operation launched by the Syrian government, and the consequent forced displacement as well as a humanitarian crisis that may affect nearly half a million people.

Accordingly, the Syrian Civic Platform (SCP) calls for the following:

- The guarantor states must exert pressure on the Syrian government to terminate the military campaign and comply with the Astana de-escalation zones agreement, until the process for a political solution continues.
- Direct relief organizations must initiate an urgent humanitarian needs assessment, especially for medical needs.
- Interventions must be made to cope with the waves of displacement, which could affect Jordanian territories.
- The Jordanian government must allow patients, the injured and people with special needs to receive the necessary care on their territory.

Ultimately, SCP indicates that these recent military developments, forced displacements as well as non-compliance with the Astana agreement do not serve the path of political solution in Syria. SCP stresses that a political solution must be carried out under the auspices of the United Nations, in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué; the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015); and relevant resolutions.