



Funded by the
European Union



*Local men in Dar'a reconcile their status with the Government of Syria.
Image courtesy of Tasnim News*

SECURITY ARCHIPELAGO:

Security Fragmentation in Dar'a Governorate

METHODOLOGY

In order to map the current security landscape of southern Syria, COAR relied on primary data from field researchers as well as inhouse research capacity. To map the presence of armed actors in each community, COAR used two key informants who have direct physical access and maintain networks in all communities of Dar'a governorate. COAR adopted a similar methodology to identify the most influential armed actor in each community. Field researchers relied on their own general perception and that of the communities to measure the degree of influence that armed actors exercise in each locality. Alongside an approach based on local perception, this assessment also relied on other key factors jointly identified by COAR and field researchers. These factors included: the presence of checkpoints; the presence of important local commanders; and the prevalence of armed actor-controlled physical structures.

Primary data was collected over a period of six weeks, between August and September 2019, and was then verified and triangulated by inhouse the COAR research unit. COAR analysts and outside experts reviewed primary data and consulted with other local sources and experts outside of the COAR team to resolve any discrepancies identified in the information gathered by field researchers. The findings in this paper should not be taken as fully authoritative or static; indeed, considering the fluidity of events in Dar'a, the presence and influence of these pro-Government groups is subject to change on a regular basis.

The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). WPCS provides operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers that will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

The content compiled and presented by COAR is by no means exhaustive and does not reflect COAR's formal position, political or otherwise, on the aforementioned topics. The information, assessments, and analysis provided by COAR are only to inform humanitarian and development programs and policy. **While this publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union, its contents are the sole responsibility of COAR Global Limited, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.**

For more information or inquiries, please send an email to syria-update@coar-global.org.

CONTENTS

4	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
5	CONCLUSIONS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS
7	A 'PATCHWORK' RECONCILIATION
7	GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA-LED RECONCILIATION NEGOTIATIONS
8	GOVERNMENT OF RUSSIA-LED RECONCILIATION NEGOTIATIONS
9	THE POST-RECONCILIATION SPACE
9	PRO-GOVERNMENT SECURITY ACTORS: DIFFERENT MANDATES, DIFFERENT AUTHORITIES
12	COMPETITION IN RECONCILIATION AND REMOBILIZATION
15	FINDINGS: A SECURITY ARCHIPELAGO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 18 July 2018, southern Syria reached a reconciliation agreement with the Government of Syria following a large-scale military offensive. However, since at least January 2019, Dar'a governorate — in contrast to other reconciled areas — has become one of the most violent regions of the country. Numerous assassinations, clashes, and asymmetric attacks take place on a weekly basis, and there is a growing anti-Government insurgent movement. This is likely due, in part, to the fact that the southern Syria reconciliation differed from other reconciled areas; southern Syria was reconciled under a 'patchwork' reconciliation strategy, with parallel reconciliation negotiations led by either the Government of Syria or Russia taking place at the same time, often in the same places. Additionally, almost immediately following the reconciliation agreement, armed opposition combatants were quickly reconciled and remobilized into a variety of different pro-Government military and security groups, which competed with one another to mobilize manpower through recruitment and, later on, via forced conscription and detention.

It is important to understand the contours of the current security landscape of southern Syria. In the early stages of the post-reconciliation period, the general expectation was that these various pro-Government groups (and their regional backers) would attempt to carve out different geographical spheres of influence within southern Syria. This paper was thus initially intended to be an attempt to map out the distribution of armed groups in southern Syria, in order to determine these spheres of influence. However, upon examination, it is clear that a wide-ranging geographic delineation of authority has not taken place. In fact, the majority of communities within Dar'a governorate harbor a multitude of security actors that are in open competition with one another and are distributed seemingly randomly throughout the region, with no clear patterns of influence or control. Only a handful of relatively circumscribed regions are controlled by a single pro-Government armed group. Indeed, southern Syria does not appear to be an assemblage of 'zones of influence'; it is, instead, a 'security archipelago', where the presence and influence of armed groups change from community to community, almost by the kilometer.

In the post-reconciliation context, this security archipelago, compounded by the mechanisms of the southern Syria reconciliation (and an increasingly dire economic situation), appears to have engendered a state of lawlessness in southern Syria; it has also created space for a civilian protest movement and growing armed opposition insurgency. However, Dar'a governorate is by no means the only part of Syria where pro-Government military and security actors are fragmented; indeed, many Syria analysts have, rightly, pointed to southern Syria as a potential 'model' by which to examine the state of the country as a whole. With no actor capable of fully securing control of the governorate, and no clear governing authority capable of unifying these actors, this status quo is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSIONS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Different zones of influence can be roughly demarcated in Dar'a; however the effective control of each group is contested by the sheer presence of other actors.** Certainly, while it is clear that the Military Security, Air Intelligence, 4th Division, and 5th Corps are the predominant armed actors in southern Syria, they do not have clearly defined zones of control or authority, outside of some limited areas. Essentially, throughout most of Dar'a governorate, there is no 'ultimate authority' to appeal to and no clear guarantor of security at the individual or community level. Multiple military and security groups are present throughout the region, often acting at cross purposes; security branches detain individuals linked to other security branches, clashes between pro-Government groups are common, and military and civilian leadership are often compelled to appeal to multiple different authorities to resolve conflicts.
- **The fragmented security landscape of Dar'a reflects the fragmented reconciliation process and a fragmented reconciliation implementation.** Ultimately, the chaotic security landscape of Dar'a can be attributed to the multiple parallel reconciliation channels that took place in the governorate simultaneously; the resulting disorder was compounded by the fact that these reconciliations were then implemented by a multitude of openly competitive military and security actors. In areas where there is a single clear authority (such as Busra Ash-Sham, where the 5th Corps, backed by Russia, is clearly the dominant local force) violence is notably less prevalent and there are clear channels to Russian officials who can resolve disputes and intercede on behalf of communities. Dar'a can also be compared to other reconciled areas — such as Eastern Ghouta, where the Republican Guard is clearly the dominant security actor. While Eastern Ghouta is by no means a positive example, it is certainly not experiencing the open violence that can be seen the rest of Dar'a. Additionally, the way in which armed opposition combatants were quickly reconciled into different pro-Government groups presented a new challenge; essentially, these pro-Government groups have 'inherited' fractured and often hostile relationships between different opposition commanders and combatants, as well as having their own competitive relationships.
- **So long as security actors in Dar'a remain fragmented, local recovery will be extremely challenging. However, in the absence of local recovery, many underlying issues will not be resolved.** Dire security conditions and the resulting lack of a clear and cohesive authority structure makes the implementation of local recovery projects especially challenging in Dar'a governorate. Economic conditions and poor state services are two of the largest contributing factors to the continuation of the Dar'a civilian protest movement, as well as the growing armed opposition insurgency. Local recovery and security fragmentation are thus a 'chicken and egg' problem; a lack of local recovery has contributed to the deteriorating security situation in Dar'a, but local recovery is challenging so long as there is security fragmentation.

- **Security fragmentation leads to violence, but it also creates ‘space’; in Dar’a this is demonstrated by a growing armed opposition and civilian protest movement.** As noted, the main manifestations of popular discontent with the Government of Syria in Dar’a are the ongoing civilian protest movement and the growing armed opposition insurgency. The latter conducts assassinations and asymmetric attacks throughout the governorate. We do not see similar movements in many other reconciled areas, and most other reconciled areas do not witness the same degree of security fragmentation. In the majority of reconciled areas there is clearly one dominant security actor throughout the entire area; in the case of Eastern Ghouta, for instance, it is the Republican Guard. An argument could be made that the security fragmentation in Dar’a — and the fact that pro-Government military and security actors are openly competitive and incapable of coordinating locally — has essentially created the ‘space’ for these movements. So long as the Government of Syria is incapable of exerting unified control over the region, its capacity to crack down on these movements in a cohesive way, as in other reconciled areas, will be limited.
- **Government of Syria security fragmentation is by no means unique to Dar’a; however, in other locations the ‘space’ created by security fragmentation will likely manifest in different ways.** Dar’a governorate is not the only place in Syria where pro-Government armed actors are fragmented and competitive. Open clashes between pro-Government groups take place on a regular basis elsewhere in the country — most commonly in Deir-ez-Zor, Aleppo city, rural Hama, and Lattakia. The security fragmentation in Dar’a could thus, potentially, be viewed as a microcosm of the country at large and a potential trajectory for many parts of Syria. However, the ‘space’ created by security fragmentation in other parts of the country will not necessarily lead to protest movements or local insurgencies; instead, it will likely manifest in unique local dynamics. In Deir-ez-Zor, this could be a tribal conflict; in Lattakia, it could be the prevalence of criminal gangs; in Aleppo city, it could be conflict between powerful local business interests. Essentially, security fragmentation in other parts of the country may allow prevalent local tensions normally suppressed by security actors to become dominant forces in the political and security landscape.



A combatant stands at a checkpoint in Dar'a. Image courtesy of Sham Network.

A 'PATCHWORK' RECONCILIATION

To understand the current security landscape in southern Syria, it is necessary to examine how the reconciliation agreement was negotiated, the key stakeholders that negotiated it, and the various security actors that rose to prominence following its implementation. The southern Syria reconciliation agreement was a 'patchwork'¹ agreement; essentially, reconciliation negotiations in southern Syria were led by either Russian representatives and interlocutors, or by Government of Syria officials. Russian representatives and Government of Syria officials focused their negotiations on different types of local intermediaries: the Government of Syria largely relied on the traditional local civilian notables of the region while Russia relied on armed opposition leadership figures. The division of these negotiations, at least at the outset, also had an observable geographic component. Russia clearly prioritized negotiations in southeastern rural Dar'a, while the Government of Syria mainly focused on negotiations in western and northern Dar'a.

At the time, there was considerable debate within the Syria analyst community concerning the extent to which these multitiered negotiations were part of a coordinated strategy or, rather, emblematic of a lack of coordination (or even competition) between Russia and the Government of Syria. This question remains unanswered. However, as a result of these parallel negotiation processes, reconciliation negotiations assumed disparate forms in different areas. In some regions of southern Syria, either Russia or the Government of Syria was clearly the leading reconciliation actor; in other areas, both Russian interlocutors and Government of Syria intermediaries were simultaneously negotiating reconciliation agreements with different actors.

Government of Syria–Led Reconciliation Negotiations

Government of Syria reconciliation negotiations were primarily led by state security services, such as the Military Security Branch. Indeed, the Government of Syria's most important negotiator in southern Syria was the head of the Military Security Branch in Dar'a and As-Sweida, Louay Al-Ali. In a similar manner to other opposition-held areas, the Government of Syria pursued reconciliation by mobilizing its long-standing relationships with local notables, state employees, and tribal leaders who had maintained ties with the Government of Syria state apparatus or Al-Assad regime officials. These local notables in turn leveraged their social capital and connections to urge the local population to remain open to the prospect of reconciliation.

1 For example: throughout the offensive armed opposition groups in Nawa were reportedly negotiating with Ahmed Oudeh under the auspices of the Oudeh Agreement, whereas local community leaders were reportedly negotiating with Government of Syria political officials.

The reconciliation agreements brokered by the Government of Syria were largely similar to other Government of Syria–brokered reconciliation agreements, stipulating: the conscription of armed individuals to Government of Syria forces after a six-month grace period; the evacuation of prominent civilians involved in local governance and civil society, as well as ‘irreconcilable’ armed groups; the restoration of Government of Syria service provision and local governance bodies²; and the suspension of humanitarian programs implemented by unregistered NGOs. However, unlike many other reconciliation agreements, the Government of Syria–led reconciliations in southern Syria did not specifically stipulate an active role for Russian military police in the implementation of the agreement or in the post-reconciliation period.

Government of Russia–Led Reconciliation Negotiations

In contrast to the Government of Syria reconciliation process, the Russian-led reconciliation negotiations, which were led by Russian Ministry of Defense Representative Colonel Alexander Zorin, relied almost exclusively on negotiations with leaders of armed opposition groups, of whom the most prominent was Ahmad Oudeh, the commander of the Shabab As-Sunna group based in Busra El-Sham. This led the Russian negotiations track to be commonly referred to as the ‘Oudeh Agreement.’ Ahmad Oudeh, alongside other armed opposition figures who participated in the Russian negotiations, remain key focal points for Russia in Dar’a.

Most importantly, the Russian-brokered Oudeh Agreement stipulated that armed opposition groups would be reconfigured into new groups and reconciled wholesale; the most prominent of these new entities, the 5th Corps, would be led locally by Ahmad Oudeh. The armed groups and combatants that reconciled under this plan would nominally fall under the protection of Russian guarantees. As such, these groups and individuals would be exclusively responsible for policing communities within Russian influence zones, and would maintain direct contact with Russian representatives (especially with respect to detentions and military conscriptions). Notably, these influence zones were relatively undefined. While it was commonly understood that Busra Esh-Sham was to come under Russian influence, the extent of Russian influence in the remainder of Dar’a governorate was essentially open to interpretation. Russian representatives were also assigned as liaisons between different reconciled groups and the Government of Syria, to mediate on matters related to conscription and the release of detainees. Notably, the Russian negotiations were exclusively military in nature; they did not stipulate the restoration of services, which is a common term in all Government of Syria–brokered reconciliation agreements. In practical terms, this meant that the Government of Syria retained control over service provision even in areas that came under Russian influence, further complicating the degree to which Russian-influenced zones would be differentiated from other parts of Dar’a.

2 *The restoration of local governance generally refers to the recreation of the baladiya (municipality) after dismantling opposition local councils and local family councils.*

THE POST-RECONCILIATION SPACE

Shaped by these parallel reconciliation tracks, southern Syria was generally expected to be carved into fairly coherent spheres of influence: namely, a sphere of Russian influence and another presided over by the Government of Syria. It can be argued that such spheres of influence were actually in place in the early stages of reconciliation in southern Syria.³ However, the confusion resulting from parallel reconciliation tracks was quickly compounded by the disjointed implementation of the reconciliation agreements, which was carried out by a multitude of pro-Government military and security actors. These actors were assigned control over different, often noncontiguous, patches of territory in southern Syria and were quickly forced into local competition.

Thus, what was at the outset a series of parallel reconciliation processes has become a 'security archipelago'. Essentially, a variety of pro-Government groups were forced to compete for influence over disjointed swaths of territory, with little unified control over local security, populations, or service provision. These pro-Government groups quickly attempted to bolster their ranks by reconciling and recruiting former opposition combatants (who themselves were often at odds with one another), and they increasingly derive their authority from different outside sources (either the Government of Russia or within the Al-Assad Government). Naturally, this is not a security landscape that is conducive to local recovery, and it has, in a sense, created the space for the continued opposition insurgent activity in southern Syria.

Pro-Government Security Actors: Different Mandates, Different Authorities

Following the reconciliation agreement, essentially six prominent pro-Government security actors were deployed to southern Syria: the 4th Division, the State Security Branch, the Political Security Branch, the Air Intelligence Division, the Military Security Branch, and the 5th Corps. Nominally, each of these actors holds a unique mandate; in practice, however, each group is essentially in competition with the others for local influence, and they effectively act as local armed groups and power brokers in areas where they are present.

In one sense, local competition is a feature of the Syrian security structure: multiple military and security branches have overlapping mandates, and are, to some degree, intended to act as a check on one another. However, as a result of the patchwork reconciliation of Dar'a,

3 A fixation on Iran's influence and role in southern Syria has been part of this narrative — and even predated it — despite the absence of an overt Iranian role in the reconciliation process itself. Although there is reportedly a Hezbollah presence in southern Syria, Iranian influence is mostly channeled through Government of Syria military and security divisions; in most cases, Iranian influence is reportedly wielded through personal connections to key commanders or generals in these divisions.

these groups also have linkages to different national and regional stakeholders; some (such as the 5th Corps) have a direct line to Russian officials, while others are more closely linked to different stakeholders within the Government of Syria or Iran. Thus, the security actors in Dar'a are not only in competition with each other structurally, they also derived their actual authority from different sources and prominent stakeholders.



A combatant holds a photo of Syrian President Bashar Assad Photo in Dar'a governorate. Image courtesy of Anapress.

The conduct of the various pro-Government armed groups is thus dictated far more by local dynamics than by the nominal functions assigned to them by the Government of Syria or other high-level authorities. Naturally, the structure of the Government of Syria's military and security apparatuses has undergone major changes throughout the conflict; these apparatuses have thus come to take on roles in military and security operations that do not necessarily resonate with the nominal and official functions allotted to them by the Government⁴.

The 4th Division

The 4th Division is considered to be one of the most powerful divisions in the Syrian Arab Army and is present across all Government of Syria-controlled areas. The division sits under the Ministry of Defense and is led by Maher Al-Assad, and it is therefore directly linked to

⁴ The changing role of Syrian military and security branches, as well as newly created paramilitary groups, has been covered in some detail. [*Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*](#), as well as [*Syria's Troublesome Militias*](#), both by the Carnegie Middle East Center's Kheder Khaddor, are excellent primers on these dynamics.

President Bashar Al-Assad. Notably, the 4th Division has a significant degree of independence, likely due to its close ties to the upper echelons of the Al-Assad Government. It has its own budget and includes a security office that functions as an intelligence unit. In many ways, the 4th Division (like the Syrian Republican Guard) should be considered to be a direct 'arm' of the Syrian regime itself.

The State Security Branch

The State Security Branch is officially known as the Directorate for General Intelligence and is present across the country, primarily in governorate capitals. It is made up of three main departments: Internal Security Intelligence, External Security Intelligence, and the Palestinian Affairs Branch. The State Security Branch nominally reports directly to the Ministry of Interior but practically operates with a significant degree of independence; it is currently headed by General Hussam Loq. Theoretically, the State Security Branch is responsible for all intelligence gathering; practically, State Security functions as one of many security services that gather intelligence on both the local population and other security branches.

The Political Security Branch

The Political Security Branch is an intelligence unit that sits under the Ministry of Interior. The head of the Political Security Branch in any governorate is considered the primary security actor under the governor; thus, the Political Security Branch often has an important role in local governance. The main intelligence functions of the Political Security Branch concentrate on civil political affairs, such as individual involvement in political parties and acts of opposition to state authority or the president. Officials and commanders within this division are known to engage in a degree of coordination with the Government of Iran; the current head of the Political Security Branch, Nasser Al-Ali, is rumored to have linkages to Iranian officials.

The Air Intelligence Division

The Air Intelligence Division was established by former Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad, in 1968, and is one of the most powerful security branches in Syria. It sits under the Ministry of Defense but retains a special status, as its commander coordinates directly with the Presidential Office and President Bashar Al-Assad; indeed, its main office is situated within the Presidential Palace. While nominally concerned with aviation security, the Air Intelligence Division practically functions as a political security branch inside Syria. Air Intelligence is reputed to be the most-feared of all of the Syrian security branches and is known to have a heavily Alawite officer corps and leadership.⁵ Many high-ranking officers in the Air Intelligence Division are also known to have close ties to Iran and IRGC commanders.

The Military Security Branch

The Military Security Branch sits under the Ministry of Defence and is nominally responsible for all military security issues. The Military Security Branch has thus become crucially important during the Syria conflict; its main undertaking throughout this period was to provide intelligence concerning defections, the political trustworthiness of officers, and the allegiances of reconciled combatants. The Military Security Branch hosts multiple departments but in Dar'a the Branch functions as an important army division as much as an intelligence and security service. Notably, the Military Security Branch is perceived as being linked to Russian stakeholders, due to the fact that it is directly responsible for coordinating with Russian Military Police.

The 5th Corps

The 5th Corps was created in November 2016, as part of a Russian initiative to form a new pro-Government armed group capable of both taking part in major military offensives and securing local communities. Originally, the 5th Corps recruited individuals from across Government of Syria-held areas, offering competitive salaries; however, over time the 5th Corps has become a repository for reconciled armed opposition groups and combatants. Indeed, as of 2019, the 5th Corps is believed to be predominantly comprised of reconciled combatants from across Syria. In Dar'a governorate, the 5th Corps is led by Ahmed Oudeh and maintains its largest presence in eastern rural Dar'a, where it is the most influential armed actor. Emerging from the Russian-led reconciliation process, the 5th Corps exclusively coordinates with the Government of Russia.

Competition in Reconciliation and Remobilization

The way in which pro-Government armed and security actors have been forced into competition with one another to reconcile, recruit, and remobilize former opposition combatants is certainly the most glaring manifestation of this inter-armed group competition and is likely the most important cause of the subsequent security collapse in Dar'a⁵. In some cases, entire opposition groups reconciled wholesale into pro-Government military or security branches, as part of local reconciliation agreements. In other cases, pro-Government groups offered progressively higher salaries in order to attract individual combatants and commanders. Pro-Government groups also competed with one another to forcibly conscript as many individuals as possible, in order to swell their ranks locally.

The recruitment of armed opposition combatants into pro-Government armed groups took

⁵ Notably, one local source said that Air Intelligence officers who are not Alawite often begin to speak with an Alawite accent, as a means of either ingratiating themselves into the group or masking their ethnic/religious identity.

place immediately after — or, in some cases, concurrent with — the reconciliation process. In the early stages of the reconciliation, entire armed opposition groups were reconciled and incorporated into existing military groups, primarily under the auspices of Russian negotiations. Some of these groups, such as Ahmed Oudeh's Shabab Al-Sunna, were directly incorporated into the 5th Corps. Others, such as Jaish Al-Moataz Billah, reconciled wholesale but were not fully dissolved and incorporated into the 5th Corps; instead, the groups were allowed to remain cohesive units subordinate to the 5th Corps.⁷

However, concurrent with the wholesale reconciliation and remobilization of groups under Russian mediation, several pro-Government military and security branches (such as the 4th Division, the Military Security Branch, and the Air Intelligence Division) immediately sought to recruit individual former opposition combatants or commanders into their ranks. Each of these military and security branches established a series of offices throughout southern Syria where former opposition combatants could go to present their documentation and reconcile. At these reconciliation offices, pro-Government security groups would often compete to recruit former opposition combatants; different branches would offer progressively higher salaries, or preferable reconciliation terms.⁸ Needless to say, the dire economic conditions of Dar'a governorate, and the fact that many opposition combatants had for years primarily earned a living from armed groups, led many combatants and even some civilians to willingly join pro-Government armed groups.⁹

After a considerable number of former opposition combatants were reconciled and remobilized, pro-Government groups were compelled to resort to forced conscription as a means of boosting their numbers locally. In southern Syria, pro-Government armed groups began to forcibly recruit large numbers of military-aged males throughout the governorate, primarily at checkpoints and through raids and arbitrary detentions. Forced conscription after reconciliation is common across all reconciled areas; military service is the law of the land in Syria, and conscription is meant to take place after a six-month 'grace period' following reconciliation. However, in southern Syria, conscription began shortly after reconciliation — even during the 'grace period'.¹⁰ Moreover, when individuals are detained for military service in Dar'a they are often quickly conscripted into the military units that have detained

6 *The course of this process was partially predetermined by the nature of the reconciliation itself and was dictated by the different negotiation tracks pursued by the Government of Syria and Russia and their respective intermediaries.*

7 *The recruits of the 5th Corps were relatively concentrated in Busra Esh-Sham and its vicinity, as this area is the stronghold of 5th Corps commander Ahmad Oudeh.*

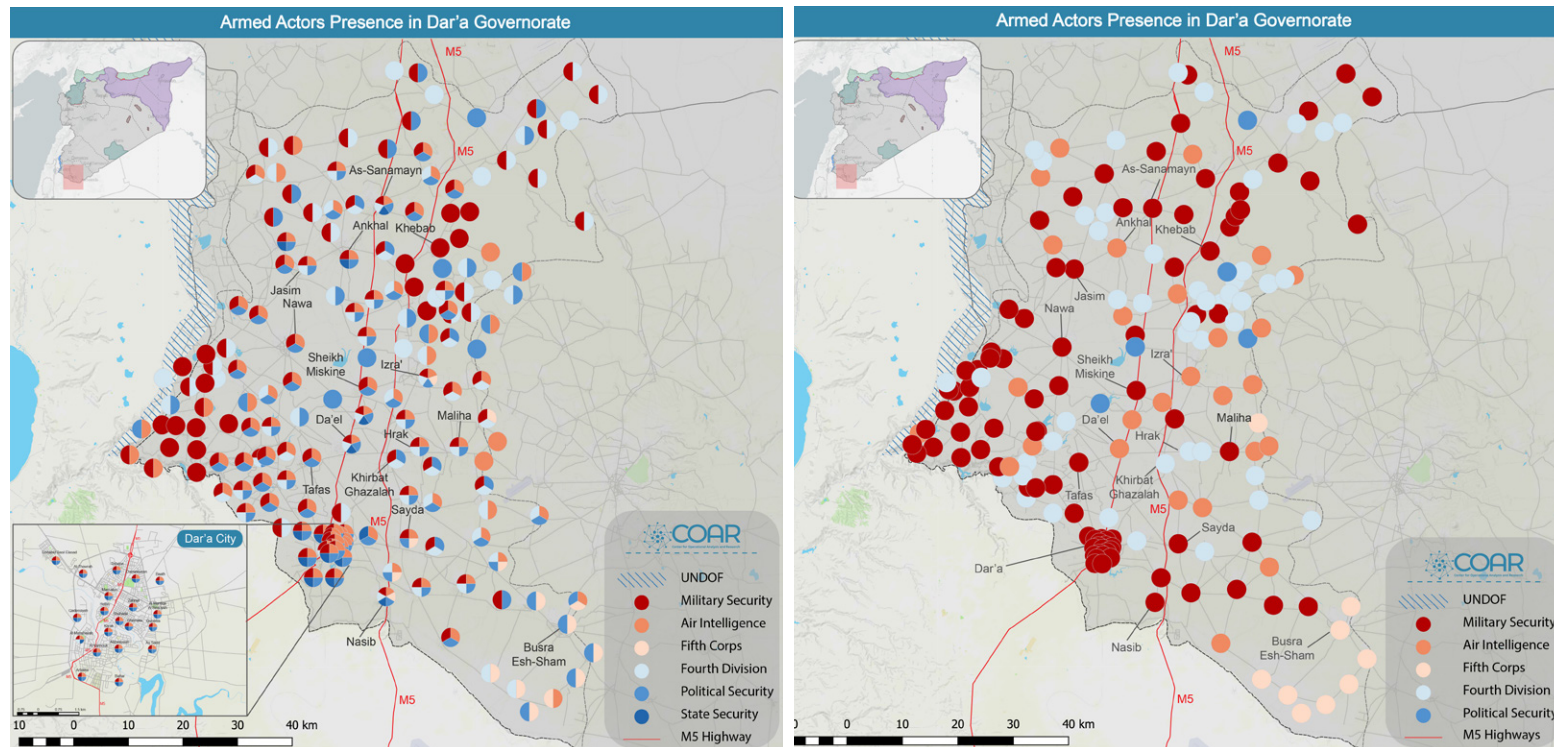
8 *For example, 5th Corps reconciliation offices were reportedly offering a monthly salary of around \$150-\$170 to reconciling combatants; in the same communities, the Military Security Branch reportedly offered approximately \$150 per month but added that reconciling combatants could remain in their home communities. For context, an average Syrian state employee makes \$80 per month.*

9 *As is the case in other reconciled areas — and, more generally, across almost all Government of Syria-controlled areas — the economic situation in Dar'a governorate has not improved despite the lifting of economic and access restrictions in the immediate aftermath of reconciliation. In fact, the dismantling of the extensive humanitarian response in the area has naturally had a significant impact on the provision of services, the livelihood of individuals formerly employed by humanitarian organizations, and the functionality of market activity.*

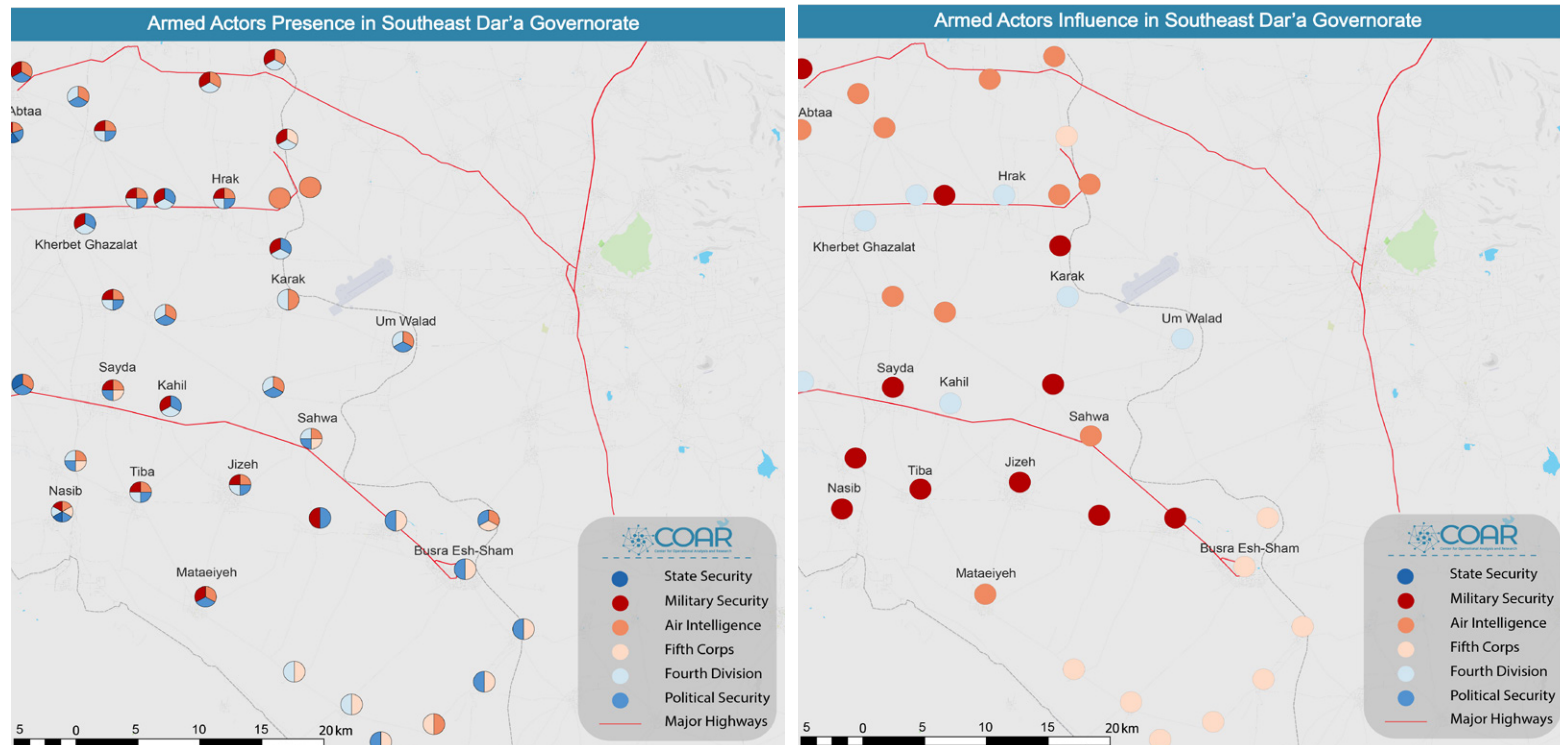
them, thus incentivizing armed groups to detain and conscript as many individuals as possible (or, at least, more individuals than competing groups). Naturally, this emphasis on conscription has led to considerable discontent throughout southern Syria; thus, in addition to driving competition between pro-Government armed groups, it further fuelled growing resentment toward the Government of Syria itself.

¹⁰ *Conscription during the 'grace period' is not uncommon in other reconciled areas, such as Eastern Ghouta or northern Homs.*

FINDINGS: A SECURITY ARCHIPELAGO



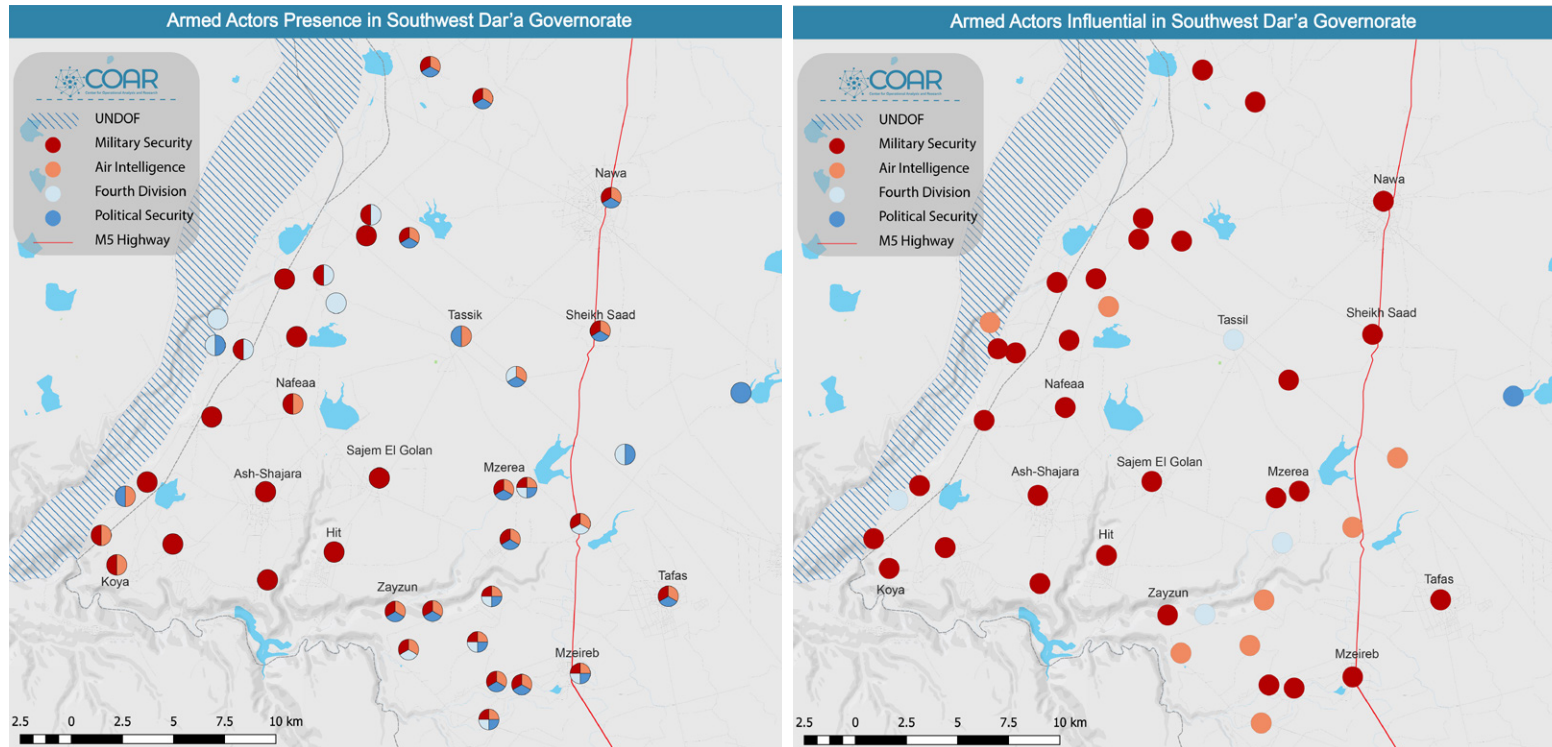
As noted, the reconciliation of southern Syria was initially a 'patchwork' process whereby Russia and the Government of Syria negotiated parallel sets of localized agreements, theoretically delineating different zones of influence in accordance with broad reconciliation tracks. However, these reconciliations were subsequently implemented by various pro-Government armed groups, which answered to different authority structures and competed with each other for local prominence. What we see when examining the distribution and influence of the pro-Government military and security branches in Dar'a reflects this process. The presence and influence of specific actors do, in some cases, accord with delineated zones; however, in general, the majority of populated Dar'a governorate is marked by the presence of a multitude of armed actors, with no clear patterns of influence or control.



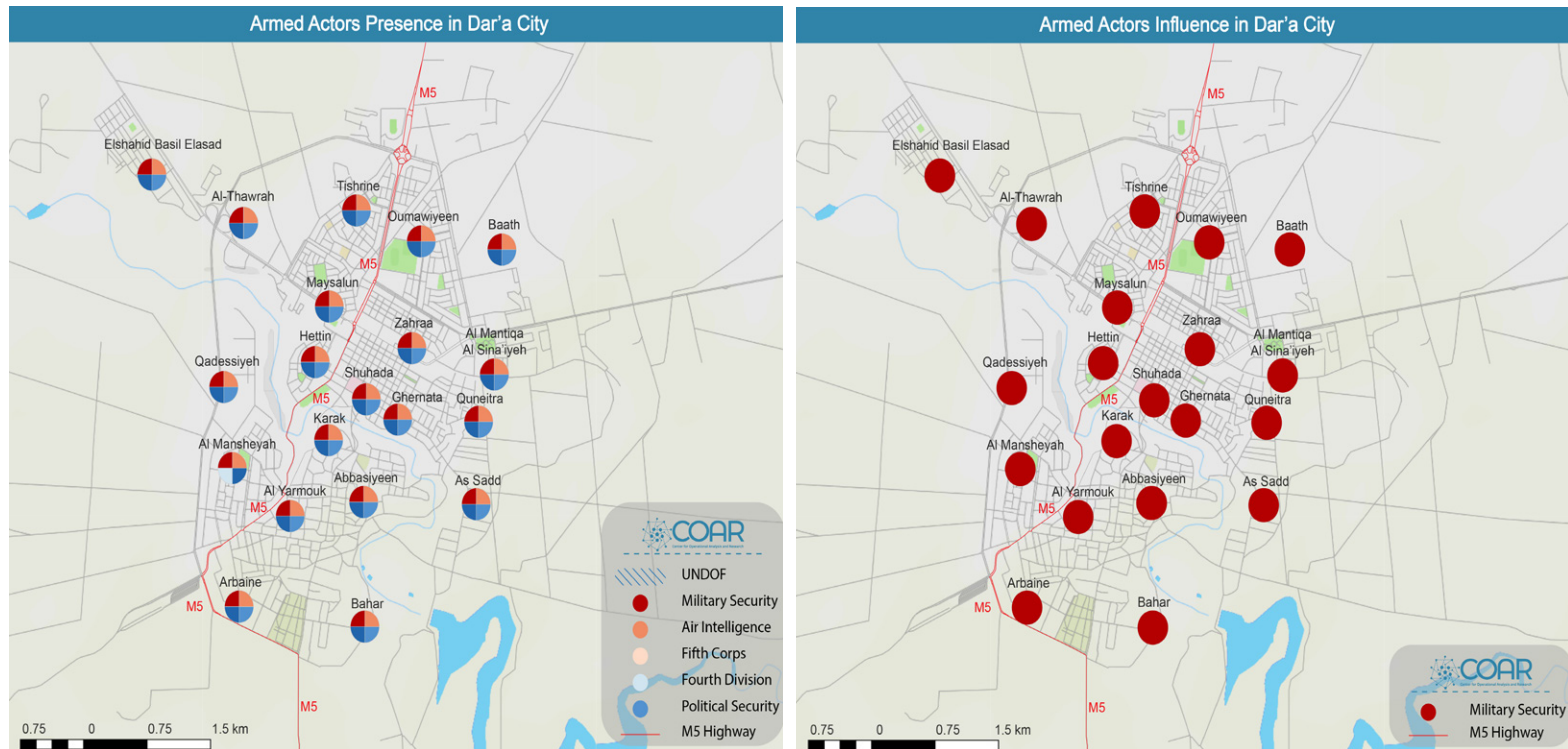
Perhaps the clearest zone of unified armed-actor influence in Dar'a is in the vicinity of Busra Esh-Sham, where the reconciliation process was primarily driven by the Russian-led negotiations under the Oudeh Agreement. Indeed, the Russian-backed 5th Corps is concentrated in eastern rural Dar'a, where they are the most influential actor in almost every area in which they are present.¹¹ It is also worth noting that the security situation in the vicinity of Busra Esh-Sham is reported to compare favorably with other parts of Dar'a — likely owing, in part, to the fact that the 5th Corps is clearly the dominant armed group in the area.¹²

11 It is important to reiterate that several local armed groups that reconciled under the Oudeh Agreement do not answer directly to the 5th Corps, but still work closely with the Government of Russia through the Hmeimim airbase. These groups are generally quite small and localized; for that reason, they are not included in this study.

12 A recently released EUI paper, also part of the WPCS project, entitled *Governance in Daraa, southern Syria: the roles of military and civilian intermediaries*, covers dynamics in Russian-dominated areas of southern Syria in some detail.



Another zone of unified armed-actor influence is in western Dar'a, along the Israeli border, where the Military Security Branch is clearly present and influential in border communities. This could partially be explained by the fact that, in normal circumstances, Military Security would be responsible for securing the border; its presence here could be seen as a continuation of their pre-war mandate. Despite its prominence, it is also worth noting that the number of armed groups per community, and the influence of those groups, has become more disaggregated and fractured in the more populated areas in the vicinity of Mzeireb and Nawa.



The Military Security Branch is also clearly the most influential actor in Dar'a city itself. However, likely owing to the importance of Dar'a city as a governorate capital, all pro-Government groups, with the exception of the 5th Corps, are present in the city. Dar'a city is thus, in some ways, another example of the general fluidity of military and security control in Dar'a governorate as a whole. Practically, this reflects the extreme localization and overlap of these groups on the ground, even at the neighborhood level.

Meanwhile, in northern Dar'a, the 4th Division is heavily deployed in the vicinity of Sur and Izra'a, likely owing to the fact that Izra'a hosts an important military base. However, when examining the region as a whole, no clear patterns exist beyond these small pockets. The presence and influence of armed groups changes from community to community throughout the large majority of the governorate, especially in populated areas along the M5 highway and in western Dar'a .

