NAVIGATING FRAGMENTATION: IMPROVING FREE MOVEMENT IN DARAA, SOUTH SYRIA

Despite several so-called peace and reconciliation agreements signed between regime and opposition forces in Daraa from 2018 to 2021, evidence shows that human safety in the south has decreased, and free movement is a right that Syrians can only dream of.

Women walk past a mosque, damaged during clashes between rebels and regime forces, in Syria's southern city of Daraa (September 2021).
Photo: SAM HARIRI / AFP

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Syrian government

- Decrease military and security presence in Daraa governorate, notably by cutting down the number of checkpoints to the entrance of main cities.
- Establish joint teams with the Fifth Corps to operate and regulate checkpoints. Teams should systematically include at least two female members - to reduce risks of isolation on male-dominated security teams - to carry out physical inspections on women.
- Establish joint patrols with the Fifth Corps to control the spread of armed groups and punish criminal activities on secondary roads.

For Russia as a guarantor of Syrian peace

- Monitor practices by military personnel towards civilians at checkpoints, in an attempt to stem harassment, extortion and arbitrary arrests.
- The Russian Reconciliation Centre for Syria should facilitate and supervise discussions between Syrian government forces and the Fifth Corps to agree on the exact number and location of checkpoints across Daraa, as well as joint teams to operate and regulate checkpoints.

For the international community and donors

- Implement reforms of the conditions and processes of aid delivery to return humanitarian activities to the south of Syria. Reforms should prioritise the adoption of highly flexible, innovative, collaborative and 'under-the-radar' strategies to reach people in need.
- Maintain the pressure on the Syrian regime to commit to the respect of human rights of Syrian citizens in areas that returned under its control.

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Context

The Syrian conflict has resulted in the division of the country into several areas of control. This fragmentation of authority and territory has also resulted in the alienation of Syrian communities. As war becomes normalised and negotiations are stalled, mobility is an essential asset that could bridge divisions and foster interactions, thereby promoting forms of local peace.

In the south of the country, so-called reconciliation agreements signed between 2018 and 2021 by regime forces and opposition groups allegedly remedied fragmentation. In theory, these areas are back under the control of the Syrian regime under the supervision of Russia. But the reality is more complex. The consequences of imposed peace have been discussed and criticised in terms of forced displacement and refugee waves. However, less attention has been brought to the practices of everyday movement for Syrians living in areas where peace has presumably returned.

The need to create conditions for the free movement of local populations was underscored by Iran, Russia and Turkey in the framework of the Astana peace process. Yet, the war in Ukraine prompted the steady disengagement of Russia from the Syrian south. This withdrawal – both in terms of the long-term implementation of peace deals and humanitarian response – was met with the multiplication of armed groups and gangs.

Based on these observations, this brief explores the challenges and strategies for Syrians to navigate fragmentation in Daraa governorate. It shows that **imposed peace and the prioritisation of its geopolitical interests by Russia greatly impacted human security and the human rights of local populations, as well as humanitarian action**. This calls for a change in the demands and actions of the international community and the humanitarian community towards the Syrian regime and the guarantor states of the Syrian peace process.

Free Movement of People – Challenges

Syrians living in Daraa governorate face several challenges to their movement through the province.

Main roads are dotted with **military checkpoints controlled by forces of the Syrian regime**. Beyond systematic searches and control of identification documents, regime forces are infamous for their violent practices towards civilians, including harassment, extortion and arbitrary arrests.

Secondary roads are raided by **armed groups and gangs** who carry out criminal activities such as killing, robbery, and kidnapping for ransom. These groups, whose affiliation is unclear, have spread since the so-called peace agreement signed in mid-2018 and greatly impede civilian mobility, especially from the east to the west and the north of the province. The road that connects the towns of Habib and Umm Walad in Daraa eastern countryside is particularly dangerous, as well as local roads linking Daraa and Quneitra governorates.

Military staff at checkpoints controlled by the Syrian government **monetise freedom of movement**. It is hardly possible to cross a checkpoint without being asked to pay taxes and royalties to facilitate one′s passage or avoid lengthy inspections, if not arrests. The refusal to pay bribes can lead to arrests. Some checkpoints are infamous for these practices, such as Mankat al-Hatab checkpoint on the road between Daraa and Damascus and controlled by the Fourth Division and the Military Security of the Syrian regime.

Beyond physical and psychological insecurity, these challenges to free movement in Daraa governorate have adverse consequences on a number of key drivers to the return to durable

peace, such as trade and economic activities, trust and social cohesion, and justice and security institutions.

GROUPS AT RISK

The fear of arbitrary arrests at one of the military checkpoints, as well as exposure to armed gangs on secondary roads has become the **biggest security concern** for the great majority of Syrians in Daraa governorate, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, age and political position.

The risk of passing through military checkpoints is **higher for men compared to women;** many (mostly young) men are wanted by regime forces for their refusal or failure to perform compulsory military service (conscription). However, **women are also often arrested as a means to put pressure on their male family members** who are wanted.

While less likely to be heavily searched or arrested, **women suffer from the absence of female military personnel at checkpoints**. Inspections are often experienced as embarrassing and disturbing for women, especially if they travel unaccompanied.

Civil activists, media staff and humanitarian workers are particularly vulnerable to the process of crossing checkpoints where military staff have lists of names of those known or suspected to have worked against the interests of the Syrian regime and carry out arrests. If civil activists or humanitarian workers take the risk to travel, they are **often subjected to blackmail** or the payment of high sums of money to avoid arrests.

Beyond physical and psychological vulnerability, **merchants and farmers are financially vulnerable**. Goods are subjected to strict inspections, high taxes and the worsening economic situation in south Syria aggravated practices of extortion at checkpoints. This considerably reduces the potential for local trade within the governorate. However,

corruption and bribery have spread to all state institutions, civil and military. The financial burden imposed at checkpoints is just the tip of the iceberg.

FREE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE – STRATEGIES

Renting a private car is one of the safest travelling methods in Daraa as they are not subjected to inspection at military checkpoints. Private cars refer to military vehicles whose owner offer transportation services against a (high) fee.

A number of **male Syrians rely on their female family members** - such as wives or daughters - to perform administrative tasks that require **travelling to urban centres** (i.e., application for identification documents). Indeed, women are in general less likely to be subjected to long inspections and arrests.

Syrians living in Daraa governorate rely on **the tribal nature of the area and the social status of individuals** who have good relations with military personnel at checkpoints to ease the movement of goods. This is especially the case of people who worked in areas under the control of opposition groups before 2018 and who fear travelling to main cities to buy medical material. Instead, they **pay an intermediary to import the material from urban centres**. Local figures also play a key role in the negotiation for the release of prisoners who were arrested while crossing checkpoints.

The monetisation of freedom of movement is exploited by Syrians as a protection mechanism. This strategy is popular with the general public, and particularly with those wanted on charges of civil relief work (for working in the humanitarian field in areas under the control of opposition groups before 2018). Bribes are used by users of private and public transports. Military staff at checkpoints are paid to either overlook the name of the traveller (if

s/he is wanted) or to 'forget' to inspect a vehicle and its passengers.

In most cases, Syrians simply **avoid travelling**. In Daraa, lines of control still coincide with zones of safety. As a result, inhabitants are prisoners in their own town or village. The absence of freedom of movement **prevents Syrians from rebuilding social fabric and reclaim public spaces**.

FREE MOVEMENT OF AID – CHALLENGES

Since the return of Daraa governorate under the control of the Syrian regime, the areas have been **deprived of humanitarian aid.** This is due to the fact that neighbouring Jordan stopped delivering licenses to send aid to Syria from the kingdom. Also, the process to obtain **licenses from the Syrian regime is complex, long and costly**. Finally, civil society organisations that used to work in the area outside the regime's control before 2018 have been forbidden and their **staff were added onto the list of wanted persons**, despite the so-called reconciliation agreements.

The [Caesar Act](#) **and economic sanctions** imposed on the Syrian regime directly by the US and other Western countries affect the delivery of humanitarian aid in Daraa governorate. Another obstacle if the closure of the UN border crossing between Jordan and Daraa following the veto of Russia and China at the Security Council.

Attempts to negotiate for the safe transportation and distribution of aid (against robbery and assaults) with Russia and armed groups in Daraa governorate failed.

A small group of organisations working under the auspices and control of the Syrian regime - such as the Syrian Red Crescent and Council of Middle East Churches - provides scarce aid in the form of food baskets. The **job opportunities and services** that used to be provided by civil society before 2018 **have disappeared**.

While the 'privatisation of aid delivery' in the hands of numerous civil society organisations before 2018 led to healthy competition, the **nationalisation of aid** under the grip of the Syrian regime drastically reduce the standards of aid delivery. For instance, food products are often not suitable for human consumption.

The scarcity of humanitarian aid and service directly contributed to the increase of social tensions and illegal activities such as petty theft and crime, but also the **development of a parallel economy dominated by drugs trade**. There is evidence that Syrian regime is not only aware of this parallel economy but that it benefits from it.

Humanitarian assistance is conditional to the possession of a family book and ID. However, many Syrians are unable to obtain such book for security reasons and the new civil status law passed in March 2021 complicates the ID renewal process for many Syrians inside and outside the country.

FREE MOVEMENT OF AID – STRATEGIES

A small group of organisations working under the auspices of the Syrian regime - such as the Syrian Red Crescent and Churches of the Middle East - provides scarce aid. Humanitarian relief mainly depends on community solidarity, mainly **donations by locals and expatriates, and community initiatives**.

A small number of individuals and organisations based outside Syria still manage to conduct **under-the-radar humanitarian interventions** in Daraa governorate. Their **commitment to reach people in need, flexibility and creative practices** of aid delivery are crucial skills for working in complex environments where humanitarian aid

is highly politicised and used as a bargaining chip.

The **monetisation of freedom of movement is used as a strategy by humanitarian workers** to secretly deliver aid in coordination with a number of local factions and individuals affiliated with the Syrian regime forces who accept to turn a blind eye on the entry of aid in certain cities in return for bribes.

The existence of **a network of local councils** and the experience they gained dealing with the humanitarian consequences of the Syrian conflict and emergencies (such as Covid-19) is an opportunity to identify populations most in need and distribute aid. Indeed, **the Syrian regime is effectively absent from many areas** and is not involved in the management of daily affairs.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Over a decade of violent conflict has left deep scars on the Syrian socio-political and geographical landscape. The country is fragmented into four governance and territorial entities, and communities are divided by conflict lines. Two parallel reports (2021, 2022) have highlighted the challenges and opportunities for a series of local actors, notably local civil society, to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic in the framework of a fragmented conflict.

Yet, global challenges – such as the Syrian refugee crisis, the threat posed by transnational radical groups, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic – do not stop at borders. Identified "fragments" do not operate in complete isolation and are indeed inter-dependant when it comes to the circulation of goods and, since March 2020, the monitoring and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The same goes for relations between Syria and its neighbours despite the privatisation and politicisation of external borders.

The research aims to address this issue by shedding the light on the ever-evolving and interactive process of fragmentation, looking at dynamics of "rebordering" (Vignal, 2017: 826) during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to exploring if and how the humanitarian community can contribute to the creation of "peace routes" across conflict lines and borders, this report also maps the network of responsibility and trust in the process of humanitarian coordination, and the impact of such practices on various governance actors.

Research Questions

- How do forms of aid navigate routes across governance entities, territories, and populations in Syria and between Syria and its neighbours?
- What are the navigation challenges and strategies for people inside Syria and how does fragmentation impact their human rights?
- How does the international humanitarian community get involved locally with de-facto governance institutions, armed groups and local civil society when there is a lack of a legitimate central State?
- How does humanitarian aid transit in Syria impact the political legitimacy and public authority of national governance actors?

Methodology

The data presented in this brief were collected between September 2022 and March 2023 in Syria – in northern Aleppo, Idlib and Daraa governorates – and in neighbouring countries, notably Iraq, Jordan and Turkey. The researchers conducted 84 interviews with international and local civil society members, governance stakeholders, medical professionals, and military personnel. All interviews were conducted in person by the authors of the brief as well as by research assistants with key access to certain stakeholders inside Syria. The researchers attempted to provide a representative sample of the general Syrian population in the areas of focus, and to ensure representative inclusion of political views (i.e., in support of the Syrian regime and opposition governments) and genders (male: 69.65% - female: 30.35%).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was developed by Juline Beaujouan, Principal Investigator of the research – in collaboration with independent researchers inside and outside Syria, including (by alphabetical order) Muhannad al-Rish, Abdallah El hafi, Eyas Ghreiz, Ayham Odat.

ABOUT PEACEREP

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University. PeaceRep is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), UK.

For further questions on this research, contact Juline Beaujouan:
J.Beaujouan-Marliere@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, University of Edinburgh Old College, South Bridge, EH8 9YL, UK.

w: peacerep.org | e: peacerep@ed.ac.uk