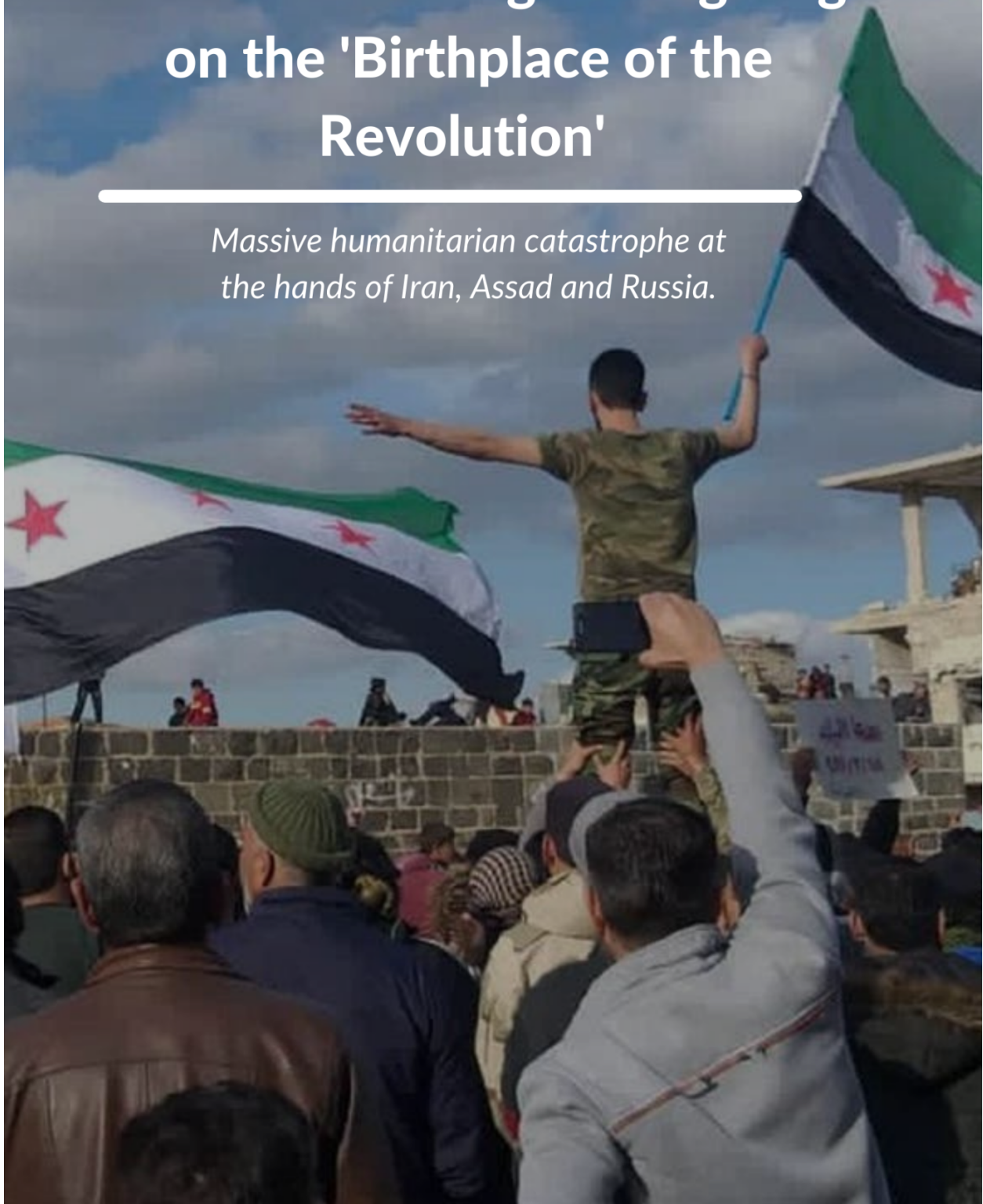


Daraa al-Balad: Tightening Siege on the 'Birthplace of the Revolution'

*Massive humanitarian catastrophe at
the hands of Iran, Assad and Russia.*



The Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF) is a tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization established in March 2011 to support the needs of the Syrian people for freedom and democracy, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, or background. SETF advocates in solidarity with the Syrian people to inform and educate the American public and its representatives about their suffering, while addressing Syria's colossal humanitarian crisis and promoting the development of Syrian civil society based on respect for human dignity and freedom.

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The Syrian Emergency Task Force would like to thank and acknowledge the hard work of our field team who strived to report the situation unfolding in Daraa in real time.

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Cover: Residents of Daraa al-Balad protesting against the siege imposed by the Assad regime and allies. Photo obtained from news website Al Bawaba.

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Executive Summary

The Syrian city of Daraa is the birthplace of the revolution, as it is where the peaceful Syrian uprising began in March 2011. This pacific Syrian movement was met with brutal violence by the Assad Regime, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in a strong wave of attacks and a ruthless siege in 2011 that claimed the lives of over 300 people in ten days. Despite an international agreement during the Astana talks of 2017 that established Daraa as a military de-escalation zone, in June 2018, the Assad Regime launched a military campaign with the objective of putting an end to a seven-year rebel rule and restoring territorial control over Daraa. Without any other alternative, in view of the strong military campaign against them and the lack of US and international support, the people of Daraa signed a reconciliation agreement with the Assad regime in mid 2018 as a chance to avert a disastrous military confrontation, restore peace, and expel foreign militias that had gained presence in the area.

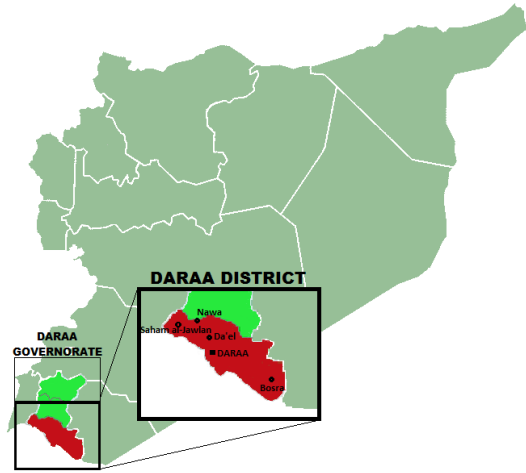
Since the revolution, the residents of Daraa have gone through a brutal siege in 2011, a military campaign by the Regime to regain control of the area, a national reconciliation agreement that ended rebel rule, broken promises by Russia and the regime, and an astounding death toll and displacement of the people of Daraa through it all.

This report presents a chronological order of events that led to the siege on the neighborhood of Daraa al-Balad that started on June 24, 2021 and extended for over 2 months (77 days) until September 9, 2021, in which 50,000 people were locked within a small area and were completely deprived of food, water, medical care, electricity, and the Internet, and were constantly threatened and attacked.

1) Daraa: Birthplace of the Revolution

Daraa, the capital of the Daraa Governorate, is a city located in Southwest Syria about 13 km north of the border with Jordan and 90 km south of Damascus.¹ According to the United Nations, as of 2011 Daraa had a population of 117,000.²

Daraa is known as the ‘birthplace of the Revolution’ because it is where peaceful protests started a decade ago. It began in February 2011, with three 14-year old school students who were inspired by the pro-democracy demonstrations in the MENA Region, now known as the Arab Spring. The children spray-painted on their school wall in Daraa the phrases: “Freedom” and, “Your turn is next, Doctor,” making reference to Assad, who is a trained ophthalmologist. In response, the regime detained and brutally tortured these and other children, leading to protests in the city of Daraa. As more people in different cities joined these protests, they spread throughout the country. Assad’s brutal response to this peaceful movement, together with Russia and Iran’s involvement, has caused the Syrian Conflict to evolve as one of the greatest humanitarian crises in the world.



2) 2011 Siege

In response to protests, from April 25 to May 5, 2011, the Assad regime besieged and raided Daraa for ten days. They stormed the city with tanks and soldiers and cut off food provisions, water, electricity and phone lines. The troops, mainly led by the elite forces of the Fourth Division and commanded by Maher al-Assad (Bashar’s brother), raided mosques, set rooftop snipers that opened fire at residents, and stormed civilian homes searching for protesters.³ While security forces killed on average 30 civilians on a daily basis, including children, people in Daraa could not move from their homes because snipers shot everything that moved.⁴ “There are bodies in the streets we can’t reach; anyone who walks outside is getting shot at, [...] they want to teach Syria a lesson by teaching Daraa a lesson.”⁵ said Abdullah, a resident of Daraa.

Attacks also included the burning of pharmacies, occupation of all hospitals, and the killing of protesters from other cities that attempted to enter Daraa during the siege. Sources said that the attacks were so brutal that a high number of soldiers - including an entire army division -

¹ UOSSM International, “Daraa Hospital and Research Statistics,” <https://www.uossm.org/daraa>

² UN Habitat, “Daraa City Profile,” June 2014, <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/Daraa%20CP.pdf>

³ Shadid, Anthony, “Syrian Army Storms Dara’a, Cracking Down on Rebels,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2011 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html>

⁴ “Syria Live Blog – 28 April,” *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2011.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110428111848/http://blogs.aljazeera.net/live/middle-east/syria-live-blog-april-28>

⁵ Shadid, Anthony, “Syrian Army Storms Dara’a, Cracking Down on Rebels,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2011 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html>

defected in Daraa and hid among its civilians.⁶ On the 6th day of the siege, the regime sent new military reinforcements and attacked and captured the Omari Mosque, which demonstrators had been using as headquarters, makeshift hospital, and a place for refuge. This was one among other attacks supported by helicopters, tanks, artillery, machine guns and paratroopers.⁷

By the last day of the siege, over 2,000 men had been arrested.⁸ The Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies reported that 244 civilian corpses, many of them children, were transferred to the Tishreen Military Hospital in Damascus as well as 81 other corpses of defectors that were most likely shot after they refused to shoot civilians.⁹ To justify their actions to the international community, the government alleged it was combating extremist and terrorist groups in Daraa.

3) 2018 Russian-brokered Agreement

Despite the siege, the town remained under full opposition control for around seven years.¹⁰ However, around mid-2018, Assad forces and Russian warplanes began a military campaign to regain control of Southern Syria, which included brutal attacks on rebel strongholds such as Daraa in order to force the rebels to accept the negotiations that eventually concluded, towards the end of July, in a “national reconciliation agreement.” The agreement led to the restoration of state control over the region, as rebels surrendered and armed opposition abandoned the neighborhoods of Daraa.¹¹

At first, the residents of Daraa refused to negotiate with the regime as they expected Western countries to intervene, considering Daraa was one of the four de-escalation zones agreed to in the Astana talks of July 2017. Moreover, in June 2018, when the Assad regime and Russian military campaign began, the US State Department released a statement warning that the US would “take firm and appropriate measures”¹² against the violations by the Regime forces and allies in the agreed-upon de-escalation zone, thus providing confidence to the people of Daraa.

Nonetheless, a note sent from Washington to rebel leaders read: “You should not base your decisions on the assumption or expectation of a military intervention by us.”¹³ Rebel leaders felt

⁶ Syria Party members quit; military defections reported”, *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/29/world/la-fg-syria-defections-20110429>

⁷ “Syrian forces shell Deraa, storm mosque,” *Gulf News*, April 30, 2011. <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/syrian-forces-shell-deraa-storm-mosque-1.801204>

⁸ “Syria: Raid in Damascus suburb as crackdown defied,” *BBC News*, May 5, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13291358>

⁹ FIDH, “Daraa: Ten Days of Massacres,” May 5, 2011. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/article_PDF/article_a9590.pdf

¹⁰ Nesibe, Bilge, “Siege: Desperation in Syria’s Daraa as Assad reverts to his old ways”, *TRT World*, July 2, 2021. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/siege-desperation-in-syria-s-daraa-as-assad-reverts-to-his-old-ways-48032>

¹¹ Al-Jabassini, Abdullah, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations,” June 2019, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/60664/RSCAS_2019_06.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Al-Khalidi, Suleiman, “Syrian rebels say U.S. won’t intervene in south Syria,” June 23, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUKKBN1JK00U>

thereupon abandoned by one of their primary external supporters since 2014. By July 2017, the US had started to decrease its financial support to rebel groups, and, a year later, it was not interested in aiding rebel efforts to resist a Russian-backed Iranian and Assad regime offensive. Under those circumstances, rebel leaders concluded that their only way out was through the negotiations.¹⁴

“At that time, they [rebel leaders] had no other choice but to accept the Russian offer for negotiations, especially that all their supporters [external states] have ditched them . . . one [rebel] whispered to the one next to him: ‘we must accept; Russians and the regime can turn us into dust in no time.’”¹⁵

In view of the strong military offensive Assad and Russia had planned against the people of Daraa, the negotiation committee in Daraa took the 2018 agreement as an opportunity to avoid a costly military confrontation with the Assad regime, restore peace, and expel foreign armed groups such as Hezbollah, Nusra Front, and ISIS.¹⁶

On July 1, 2018, the meeting between representatives of the Assad regime and the rebel factions took place under Russian mediation, and the following terms were agreed upon and signed:

(1) An immediate and comprehensive ceasefire. (2) An immediate handing over of heavy weapons. (3) The return of the population to villages and towns where the army does not have any control, and the return of the displaced people to the villages in which the army is present, accompanied by the Russian Military Police (RMP) and the Syrian Red Crescent, with a guarantee from the RMP of the safety of the population. (4) Starting the handover of medium weapons in the areas covered by the ceasefire. (5) Settling the conditions of the residents of the areas covered by the ceasefire. (6) Distributing the settlement points geographically as needed within an agreed-upon mechanism. (7) Raising the Syrian flag on the National Institutions, and the resumption of their activities under the auspices of Damascus. simultaneously with the entry of the country’s civilian institutions. (8) The fighters who settled their situation and want to fight ISIS should join the storming corps, primarily in the southern region. (9) Settling the status of defectors and those who are wanted for military service; and delaying their services for six months. (10) Working on the return of all employees to their government jobs. (11) Solve the problem of detainees and kidnapped persons within the Astana group and exchange the bodies of the dead from both sides. (12) Withdrawal of the SAA from populated cities and

¹⁴Abdullah, “From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Manna, Haytham, “Reconciliation Initiatives in Daraa: A Testimony for History,” *Geneva Center for Security Policy*, October 2020. <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/reconciliation-initiatives-daraa>

towns of Daraa. (13) This agreement includes the whole southern region. (14) The guarantor of this agreement is the Russian side.¹⁷

Broken Promises

As with other national agreements with rebels and as expected by the people of Daraa, the Assad regime and Russia have repeatedly committed acts that violate the agreements, especially, but not limited to the following, in no specific order:

- (a) Since August 2018, disappearances, guerrilla attacks, drive-by shootings, and attempted killings have become increasingly common. At least 530 violent incidents took place between August 2018 and May 2020 in Daraa and claimed the lives of more than 480 individuals. [...]*
- (b) Widespread looting of citizens' properties took place under the watchful eyes of the Russian guarantor, with homes, cultivated lands, and public facilities ransacked in broad daylight. [...]*
- (c) Assad forces have arrested people including important civilian and military figures who sought to protect their population from further violence and destruction. 634 people were arrested in the first year after the agreement. Of these, 166 were released and 9 prisoners died under torture. [...]*
- (d) Regime security opposed all civil and humanitarian attempts to rehabilitate and reconstruct the areas, and blocked all humanitarian aid that reached the Jordanian borders. The IRGC-run foreign militias returned to the region in different forms.¹⁸*

Although neither the Air Force Intelligence Agency (AFID) nor the Fourth Division publicly opposed the Daraa settlements, they both considered it unwelcome. From their perspective, the agreement ended the dominance of the Syrian security service in Southern Syria. Hence, both agencies took provocative actions against the people of Daraa, such as trying to reinstate Assad statues, preventing students from taking college exams, opening fire at civilians in many peaceful public protests, and keeping public services at very insufficient levels. The regime was definitely determined to display its existence and fly its flag again in Daraa at all costs during a second military campaign and siege in 2021.¹⁹

4) 2021 Siege

Altogether, the violations of the agreement by the Assad regime and Russia had the residents of Daraa in full discontent. For this reason, On May 25, 2021, a day before the latest presidential

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Al Jabassini, Abdullah, "Rampant violence, military escalation, and the role of intermediaries in Daraa, Syria" *Middle East Institute*, June 1, 2021.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/rampant-violence-military-escalation-and-role-intermediaries-daraa-syria>

¹⁹ Manna, Haytham, "Reconciliation Initiatives in Daraa: A Testimony for History."

elections, the residents of Daraa al-Balad peacefully protested to express their refusal to participate in them. Then, on June 25, the regime and Russia threatened to bring Iranian and Hezbollah militias, who already have a prominent presence in Syria, if residents did not surrender their light weapons. The handover of these types of weapons was initially exempt in the national reconciliation agreement, so the residents resisted such a handover. The refusal to cast a ballot and to hand over their remaining weapons led to a siege imposed by the Regime, Russia and Iran beginning on June 24, in which they began to cut off aid and to attempt to force civilians to surrender their individual weapons by threatening them. The siege, which lasted 77 days until September 9, passed onto Syrian history as a humanitarian catastrophe affecting at least 50,000 people.

Despite this not being the first siege on the area, activists said that this was the harshest they have experienced as they lacked reinforcements: “In Daraa al-Balad, it’s only the locals against the regime,” said Syrian media activist Ahmed Mousa to news channel TRT World.²⁰ In addition to electricity, water, and the Internet being cut off, all the routes to and from Daraa al-Balad were completely closed, blocking the access to and from hospitals, health centers, shops and other vital supplies and services. “Most of the shops almost ran out of basic goods and the remaining bread stocks are too old and infested by insects,” said activist Lornce Alakrad to TRT World. Furthermore, according to Alakrad, “They reinforce more soldiers on the checkpoints everyday, and anyone who attempts to cross is under threat of being shot or getting arrested.”²¹ Reportedly, regime security services and allied militia groups expanded their arrest campaigns throughout the Daraa Governorate and its countryside, and even added names exempt by the original agreement to their “wanted list.” The demonstrators gathered to demand the regime’s lifting of the siege. “I’m feeling very sad but mostly for my family,” Alakrad feared, “I might die or be arrested soon.”

A month into the siege, on June 25, Daraa Police Commander Brigadier General Dirar Dandel said, “There is no talk about opening the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad now, and whoever does not want a settlement must leave.” He added that military columns were brought to Daraa to carry out the tasks of the security and military command in the governorate, and to oversee implementation of the Assad regime's demands of the people of Daraa. In the midst of a strong military escalation by the Assad regime and allies [See “*Iran and Assad Forces Participating in the Attacks*” for a list of main forces participating in the attacks], a pharmacist on the ground said, “If the international community doesn’t intervene, we are headed for a complete slaughter.”

Furthermore, SETF continued to communicate directly with civilians inside Daraa al-Balad, as several negotiation rounds failed between the Daraa Negotiation Committee and the Russian delegation and regime officers. On August 24, they reported that Assad forces tried to storm the

²⁰ Nesibe, Bilge, “Siege: Desperation in Syria’s Daraa as Assad reverts to his old ways”, *TRT World*, July 2, 2021. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/siege-desperation-in-syria-s-daraa-as-assad-reverts-to-his-old-ways-48032>

²¹ Ibid.

besieged neighborhoods of Daraa after heavily bombing them. According to civilians on the ground,

Violent clashes erupted between the rebels of Daraa al-Balad and the Assad regime forces backed by Iranian militias, in an attempt to advance towards the city [...] under the cover of intense shelling with tanks, heavy artillery, heavy machine guns and mortars on civilian homes.

By late August, the number of forcibly displaced and arbitrary arrests²² rampantly increased after a couple of failed attempts at agreements and intensified attacks on civilians. [See “*Mass Displacement*"]. According to a source close to the negotiating committee in Daraa, on August 28 the Assad regime’s officers demanded the committee to issue an official statement recognizing (1) the regime’s flag as the recognized flag for all of Syria, (2) the regime's army as responsible for Syria's security, and (3) Bashar al-Assad as the legitimate elected president of Syria. These demands were rejected by the negotiating committee, leading to an escalation of attacks on the besieged neighborhoods. The source indicated that the regime was seeking, through these demands, to create a rift between the negotiating committee and the people of the besieged neighborhoods.

Instead, on the following day, the Central Committee in the western countryside of Daraa issued a statement in which it announced the “general mobilization” of the people of Daraa against the regime and Iran’s military campaign on the besieged neighborhoods, unless they lifted the siege on Daraa al-Balad.

An agreement was then reached on September 1 on the following points:

- (a) Stopping shelling;
- (b) Allowing in only Russian military police;
- (c) Opening a center to rectify the open files on civilians in Daraa by the regime;
- (d) Examining the IDs of the resident of daraa to ensure that there are no foreigners;
- (e) Allowing for the set up of four security checkpoints;
- (f) Ending the siege;
- (g) Allowing the policemen to return to the police building;
- (h) Allowing aid into Daraa;
- (i) Working on the release of the detainees and providing information about the disappearances after five days of the agreement to this deal.

²² Including six young men from Daraa arrested in the Syrian embassy in Lebanon. They received a phone call from the Syrian embassy to receive their passports, and when they got there they were immediately arbitrarily arrested.

A civilian from Daraa said that this agreement came after 70 days of siege and bombardment, at a very high cost: “the lives of 40 men and women - including children, tens of injured, entire homes and properties destroyed, mosques destroyed, and thousands displaced from their homes.”

However, on September 3, according to the spokesman for the Negotiation Committee Al-Masalma, “Iran thwarted what we reached in the agreement we announced two days ago,” and demanded new terms, including an increase of the number of checkpoints from four to nine, allowing Iranian forces to enter the city, and that the residents of Daraa hand over all their weapons. It was clear to the regime and Iran that the Negotiation Committee could and would not agree to the new terms, and it is also clear that “the settlements and agreements are all needles of anesthesia,” as a civilian on the ground has put it. This new development ensured that the Assad regime would have full control of Southern Syria going forward, and that Iran, who already has a dominating presence in Lebanon and Iraq, would gain a stronghold right on the border with two pivotal US allies: Israel and Jordan.

Starting on September 4, the regime, Iran and affiliated militia groups raided homes, strongly renewed attacks on civilians, and unlawfully detained women and children with the aim of pressuring the residents of the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad to accept the new conditions. Despite the residents being unable to accept the conditions (including handing over weapons, searching homes and coexisting with the presence of regime military checkpoints in their neighborhoods), the Russian delegation put additional pressure on them. On September 5, they informed the Daraa Negotiating Committee of a ceasefire until September 6, 10:00 AM, and warned them that in the event that the new demands were not complied with, the Russians would intervene in favor of the Assad regime.

As a consequence of the deal breaking down, the 50,000 civilians in Daraa al-Balad who were initially looking forward to negotiations, requested to be moved to other areas of Syria which are not under the control of the regime, such as Idlib or Aleppo, or to a neighboring country, such as Jordan. Those firm opposers who would not be able to relocate soon were likely to die at the hands of the regime and Iran. As people on the ground found it plausible, many Daraa al-Balad residents were evacuated to the Northwest, and Iran and the Assad regime simultaneously assumed control of the area as the residents of Daraa had no other choice but to agree to the newly imposed terms. The siege was lifted on September 9, yet the area and residents surrendered to a tight regime control.

Civilian Attacks

25 days into the siege, on July 18, head of the Military Security Service Brigadier General Loay al-Ali, threatened to completely demolish the Omari Mosque if the residents failed to comply.

SETF obtained information from reliable sources on the ground and reported the following attacks in the mobile app Syria Watch:

On Thursday, July 22, *(1) Forces affiliated with the Fourth Division and Military Security indiscriminately targeted the homes of civilians in the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad with missiles. (2) One civilian was killed and another wounded as a result of a shooting attack carried out by unknown persons, in Daraa's northern countryside.* On Friday, despite news of reaching a final solution from a meeting with the negotiation committee of Daraa, *(3) Assad's forces targeted with heavy machine guns houses inside the besieged areas of Daraa al-Balad.*

Furthermore, on Saturday and Sunday of the same week, Assad forces sent heavy military reinforcements to the city of Daraa. On Tuesday, July 27, *(4) Assad forces began storming the outskirts of Daraa al-Balad in southern Syria, coinciding with targeting the areas of Daraa al-Balad with missile shells. (5) Assad forces renewed their targeting with mortar shells of the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, after the failure of the round of negotiations between them and the central committees, in which a child was seriously injured.*

On Thursday, July 29, *(5) Assad forces intensively and violently bombarded the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, and used elephant missiles to target civilian homes. (6) The regime forces targeted the outskirts of the town of Al-Yadudah in the western countryside of Daraa with four surface-to-surface missiles. 6 were killed, including a woman and three children, and another is still stuck under the rubble. (7) Assad's forces bombard the city of Tafas, west of Daraa, with mortar shells (8) Military forces from the Fourth and Ninth Divisions of the Assad forces have been trying since the morning to storm Daraa al-Balad from several areas, and violent clashes are taking place in the vicinity of the town, amid intense artillery shelling targeting homes and roads. There are dead and wounded, and distress calls to evacuate them. (9) Two children were wounded to varying degrees, as Assad forces bombed the city of Inkhil in the northern countryside of Daraa, from their positions in the 15th Brigade, with mortar shells. (10) Members of the Assad forces from the Fourth Division beat and insult the displaced families from the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, which settled in the "Daraa suburb". (11) The Damascus-Amman international highway was cut off near the Nassib border crossing in Daraa. (12) Two civilians were killed and others were injured as a result of artillery shelling that targeted the city of Jassim by the Assad forces stationed in the Jadiyah Brigade, north of Daraa (13) Continuous shelling with heavy artillery and mortar shells by the Assad forces targeting the city of Jassim in the northern countryside of Daraa, in conjunction with the arrival of military reinforcements, including tanks and heavy vehicles, to the outskirts of the city.*

Over the weekend, military reinforcements, including tanks and military vehicles arrived at the outskirts of the city of Jasson in the northern countryside of Daraa. The attacks were strongly renewed on Monday, August 2 as documented in Syria Watch: *(14) Assad forces bombard with*

tank shells the Al-Bahar area in Daraa al-Balad. (15) Shelling with tank shells by the Assad forces target the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad. (16) Clashes between the rebels and the regime forces trying to advance on the outskirts of Tariq Al-Sad neighborhood in Daraa, amid artillery shelling in the area. (17) Heavy artillery shelling by Assad forces targets the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, in conjunction with the displacement of dozens of families towards Daraa al-Mahatta. (18) Heavy artillery shelling by Assad forces targets Daraa al-Balad. (19) Intense flight of reconnaissance aircraft were seen flying over Daraa al-Balad. (20) Iranian militias target Daraa suburb with tank shells and threats from militias to commit genocide. (21) Militias affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah, backed by Assad forces, target the city of Daraa al-Balad, southern Syria with rocket launchers and artillery. (22) Militias affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah backed by Assad forces target the Al-Riyajah neighborhood in the Tafas area in Daraa. (23) Violent clashes took place in several axes in Daraa al-Balad and the surrounding neighborhoods, in conjunction with intense bombing in the area. (24) Sirens sound in Al-Manshiyya neighborhood and Daraa al-Mahatta with the intensification of shelling and luminous bombs in Daraa al-Balad. (25) A column of tanks from Al-Hara area moved towards the western line near Jassim city.

On Tuesday, August 3, the Military Committee of the Assad forces pretended to agree to a 24-hour ceasefire with the Daraa Central Committee. However, less than three hours later Assad forces renewed attacks as: *(26) Assad's forces target the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa with heavy machine guns. (27) Assad forces bombard with mortar shells the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad and Daraa camp. (28) The militias affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah groups with Assad's forces renewed their shelling with mortar shells on the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad. (29)*

On Wednesday, August 4, *(30) Renewed shelling of the Al-Sad Road neighborhood in Daraa by Assad forces with tanks and mortar shells, and clashes are taking place on the school axis, east of the neighborhood. (31) Iranian militias and Assad forces resume clashes and shelling on the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad (32) Iranian militias supporting Assad's forces targeted the "Saad bin Abi Waqqas" mosque in the "Al-Sad Road" neighborhood in Daraa city, with mortar shells during the noon prayer. (33) Iranian militias and Assad's forces mobilize their forces along the road from light and heavy weapons along the Tablin Road between Atman and Adwan. (34) Heavy shelling with mortars and tanks targeting the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad and Al-Sad Road by the Fourth Division and the Iranian militias. (35) A reconnaissance aircraft of the Assad forces flew over the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad. (36) Assad forces target the town of Al-Ajami, west of Daraa, with rocket launchers.*

On Thursday, August 5, *(37) Shelling by ground anti-aircraft guns targeted the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad by Iranian militias, Lebanese Hezbollah and Assad forces, in conjunction with clashes with light and medium weapons taking place on its fronts. (38) Assad forces and Iranian*

militias target with mortar shells the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad and al-Sad Road. (39) Regime forces close Al-Saraya checkpoint in front of the displaced, which was the last available crossing between the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad and the city center. (40) A young civilian was injured as a result of the bombing of the Assad forces and supporting militias in the town of Nahtah, east of Daraa.

Attacks continued over the weekend. On Friday, August 6, (41) Assad forces and Iranian militias target the minaret of the Saad Bin Abi Waqqas mosque in Daraa al-Balad. (42) Assad forces target Daraa al-Balad neighborhoods with mortars. On Saturday, (43) Forces of the Fourth Division stationed in the Al-Ray building on the Yaduda-Al-Muzayrib road targeted with anti-aircraft guns the outskirts of the town of Al-Yadouda in the western countryside of Daraa. On Sunday, (44) Renewed shelling took place on the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad with anti-23 mortars.

Then on Tuesday, August 10, (45) Violent clashes took place on the Al-Kazia axis in Al-Manshiya neighborhood and on the eastern outskirts of the Al-Sad Road neighborhood, with the targeting of Daraa al-Balad neighborhoods with heavy machine guns by Iranian militias and Assad forces. (46) Violent clashes and shelling took place west of the town of Qarfa, southeast of the city of Sheikh Miskeen in the middle Daraa countryside. (47) Violent clashes took place between the rebels and militias affiliated with Iran, with the support of Assad forces, inside the city of Nawa, west of Daraa. (48) Artillery shelling by Assad forces targets the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad. (49) Fourth Division forces and Iranian militias bombard the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad with mortar shells. On August 12, (50) Assad forces intensively bombard with heavy artillery and mortar shells the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad.

On Saturday August 14, (51) Assad forces of the 285th Artillery Battalion, stationed next to the Panorama area, targeted the vicinity of Tafas and Yaduda, west of Daraa, with 15 mortar shells. (52) Iranian militias and the Fourth Division, stationed in the Al-Ray area, target the town of Al-Yadouda in the western countryside of Daraa with anti-aircraft. On Sunday, (53) Iranian militias, Hezbollah and the forces of Assad's 4th Division bombard the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad this morning with anti-aircraft. (54) Forces of the 4th Division bombard the city of Tafas with Vozlika shells. (55) Assad forces bombard the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad with anti-aircraft and tank shells.

On Tuesday, August 16, (56) Assad forces bombard with heavy artillery the outskirts of the city of Tafas, west of Daraa. On Wednesday, August 17, (57) Assad forces bombard the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad with heavy artillery.

After a few days without attacks given a potential agreement, daily attacks were renewed on August 24. (58) *Civilians were killed as a result of the bombing by Iranian militias the forces of the Fourth Division which targeted the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad.* On August 25, (59) *A civilian was killed and several others were wounded as a result of targeting of civilians by the Assad forces stationed at the Saraya checkpoint.* (60) *Assad forces renewed their targeting of civilians with tank shells inside the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad.* On August 26, (61) *4 civilians, including three women, were killed and 6 others were injured as a result of a bombing by Assad forces targeting the city of Tafas in the western countryside of Daraa.*

On Friday, August 27, (62) *Assad forces target with mortars and tanks the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad.*(63) *Assad forces target with anti-aircraft the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa city.* (64) *The forces of the Fourth Division stationed at the Tablin checkpoint and in Tal al-Saman shelled with tank shells the plains surrounding the city of Tafas, west of Daraa.* (65) *Assad forces intensively target the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad with rocket launchers.* On Saturday, (66) *Iranian militias and the forces of the 4th Division bombard with tank shells the besieged neighborhoods in the city of Daraa.* (67) *Assad forces bombard with elephant missiles, tank shells and heavy machine guns the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad.* On Sunday, (68) *Dead and wounded in bombing by Iranian militias and Assad forces on the town of Jalin, west of Daraa.* (69) *Artillery shelling targeting the town of Tel Shehab, west of Daraa, originating from the Assad forces stationed in the 285th Artillery Battalion, next to the Panorama in Daraa.* On August 30, (70) *"Abdullah Nasser al-Qutayfan" was killed as a result of the targeting of the besieged neighborhoods in Daraa al-Balad with heavy bombardment by Iranian militias and the forces of the Fourth Division.* On Monday, August 31, (71) *Assad's forces and Iranian militias bombard the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa with Elephant missiles.*

After the September 1 agreement broke down, on September 4, 2021 (72) *Assad's forces bombard with tanks, artillery and surface-to-surface missiles the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, 3 days after the ceasefire.* (73) *Civilians were wounded by violent missile strikes by the regime forces and militias loyal to it, targeting the besieged neighborhoods in the city of Daraa in southern Syria.* (74) *Dozens of high-explosive Iranian missiles (Golan 1 and Fajr 1) are falling on the neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, refugee camps and the Al-Sad Road at these moments. First aid and evacuation methods for the wounded are almost non-existent due to the intensity of the bombing.* On September 5, (75) *Iranian militias, in cooperation with the forces of the Fourth Division, tried to advance in the besieged neighborhoods of Daraa al-Balad, coinciding with the violent bombing of the area.* (76) *Al-Assad forces bombard with heavy artillery the vicinity of Al-Mashik village in the western Hama countryside. These attacks (75-76) claimed the lives of three citizens.* On September 8, (77) *Assad forces targeted with heavy artillery the town of Tasil, west of Daraa.*

It was in the Regime and Iran's interests to push the people out of Daraa in order to fully occupy and control the area. Thus, it was expected that these attacks escalated in frequency and intensity in the month of September, if the residents of Daraa did not surrender to the conditions imposed. Attacks ceased as the residents agreed to the new terms.

On October 20, 2021, the security committee of the Assad forces, accompanied by Russian officers, arrived at the town of Nahta, east of Daraa to start with the implementation of the settlement agreement.

Iran and Assad Forces Participating in the Attacks

Iran continues to utilize the Assad regime to serve Tehran's national interests in Syria and in the broader region. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard has complete free reign in Syria, including complete control of Assad regime military divisions. The population of Daraa is vehemently against Iran and its proxies, including the Assad regime. Throughout the siege and bombarding, they came to protest the conduct of Iran and the Assad regime:

[Translated from Arabic] *Brevity is the soul of wit. From Daraa, the South and Syria to the world watching the destruction, bloodshed and barbaric practices that history has never seen before to the whole world, we are in the last days and moments right before the end. These days will go down in history as days of disgrace and inhumanity. So first of all we hold the deceitful Russian government responsible for what's going on or will take place in future. We will fight although we know the end to this path is destruction and death. Our last message to the world's leaders is: "Save Daraa now", otherwise our cause will be a stain upon the whole world. Who claim to have no knowledge of the practices of the Syrian regime, the Iranian militias and all the criminals of the world are lying to themselves. The Iranian project will be completed by the fall of Daraa and the South. Finally, we put our trust in God, and we will remain steadfast until whatever God has ordained takes place.*

The main forces that participated in the Daraa attacks were: (1) **Fourth Division**, 555th Regiment, including the Ghaith Regiment and the Lightning Regiment (almost 60-70% of campaign) (2) **15th Special Forces Division**, The 404th and 405th Regiment, the 44th Regiment, and the 217th Regiment (3) **Fifth Division** Commando Regiment (4) Groups of the Lebanese **Hezbollah** (5) **Military and Air Intelligence** and (6) **Ninth Division**, Brigade 34, Masmiya District, 43rd Brigade Al-Sanamayn District 52nd Brigade. (7) Leaders in the **Iranian Revolutionary Guard**, and Iranian militias, mainly the **Radwan militia** and **Militia 313**.

The regime and Iran's breaking of the September 1 agreement despite the Committee's dedication to reach a settlement, also confirm what the Central Committee feared and foresaw would happen in a statement released on August 29, in which they indicated that regime forces insisted on dragging the region into a brutal war led by Iranian officers and multinational sectarian militias such as the Shaytan Party, Fatemiyoun, Zainabiyoun and others. They also mentioned that Iran's ultimate goal is to eliminate the social fabric and create demographic changes.

The international community failed to put an end to the siege, the increasingly frequent attacks and the potential atrocities, so Iran is now entrenched at the border of Jordan and Israel, two US allies. This allows Iran to pose a greater threat to the US national strategic interests and create greater destabilization in the region.

Mass Displacement

According to extremely conservative estimates from SETF's staff on the ground, the attacks claimed the lives of at least forty people and injured many others. Given the lack of access to Daraa and its people during the siege, there are no official statistics on the civilian casualties. Furthermore, the people from Daraa began running semi-daily convoys carrying hundreds of young men from the governorate in southern Syria to opposition-controlled areas in northern Syria, to escape the deprivation of basic needs and the brutal attacks. They were indirectly fleeing under Assad's regime knowledge: Corrupt officials had a green light to give them crossing facilities (including a postponement from the mandatory service, a passport, and a travel permission submitted to the travel and shipping office, which charges over \$1,700 US dollars for an airplane ticket) in return for a bribe. Their aim was to evacuate Daraa civilians as much as possible, while the rest were under pressure to bend to Iranian and Regime control.

On August 23, 2021, SETF learned from contacts on the ground that the regime had requested that 75 individuals from Daraa be handed over to them or deported to the Northwest based on the accusation that they had been carrying arms against the regime. On August 24, The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that 38,600 internally displaced persons - including almost 15,000 women, 3,200 men and elderly, and over 20,400 children -, were registered in and around Daraa, with most having fled from Daraa al-Balad.²³ On August 25, eight individuals were forcibly deported by the regime from Daraa al-Balad to Al-Bab by bus: Yousef Musalmeh, Dahi Musalmeh, Nader Musalmeh, Talal Alshami, Khaled Alshami, Ahmed Jabal, Johar Jabal, Ali Alnaimi. The people of Daraa al-Balad believe the regime and its Iranian allies had no intention to solve the current situation peacefully, and that they would not hesitate to move forward with a full-scale ground offensive with the potential to either kill,

²³ France 24, "Month of fighting in Syria's Daraa displaces 38,000: UN," August 24, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210824-month-of-fighting-in-syria-s-daraa-displaces-38-000-un>

displace, or detain the 50,000 civilians in the area. On August 26, about 55 people, most of them civilians, and their families, left on buses from Daraa al-Balad towards the north of Syria, to which a source on the ground said, “[They] most likely will be arrested at the Abu al-Zandin crossing. Displacement does not guarantee the potential implementation of a ceasefire nor the implementation of an agreement.”

5) International Law Violations

According to the International Law Programme,

International Humanitarian Law [IHL] treaties refer to ‘besieged’ or ‘encircled’ areas but do not define them, nor are sieges defined in other areas of public international law. [...]. [However] sieges typically combine two key constituent elements: ‘encirclement’ of an area for the purpose of isolating it, and bombardment. Encirclement is the defining characteristic of sieges. It is usually accompanied by bombardment – the frequency and intensity of which will vary. If the purpose of the siege is to contain enemy forces, there may be no need for bombardment, unless the forces attempt to flee. The situation is different if the objective of the siege is either to force the enemy to surrender or to assume control of the besieged area.

Concerns about the compatibility of sieges with modern rules of IHL arise because attacks into besieged areas and the isolation of the besieged forces will also adversely impact any civilians in the besieged areas; civilians are likely to be affected sooner and to a greater extent than the fighters against whom the isolation is directed. Sieges are not prohibited as such under either IHL or other areas of public international law. Under IHL, the besieging party is entitled to attack forces and other military objectives in besieged areas, and to limit supplies that reach them. However, in doing so it must comply with all relevant rules of IHL: the few that specifically refer to sieges, as well as the generally applicable rules that regulate the conduct of hostilities and afford civilian protections and safeguards.²⁴

A. Conduct of Hostilities during Sieges

As for the attack dimension during sieges, there are a set of rules that regulate the conduct of these hostilities. According to Article 49.1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (AP I), attacks are defined as “acts of violence against the adversary, whether in offence or in defence.” Thus, any act that amounts to an ‘attack,’ including the vast variety that are mentioned under the “*Civilian Attacks*” section of this report that have been conducted in the context of the siege in Daraa, must comply with a given sets of rules, which clearly the Assad regime and its allies violated by purposely targeting indiscriminate attacks at civilians and civilian objects.

²⁴ Chiara-Gillard, Emmanuela “Sieges, the Law, and Protecting Civilians,” *Chatham House*, June 27, 2019. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-27-Sieges-Protecting-Civilians_0.pdf

The rules include **(1) The principle of distinction:** Sparing civilians from attacks, and rather identifying military targets, as stated in Article 27 of the 1907 Hague Regulations²⁵ and in Article 51.2 of AP I.²⁶ **(2) The prohibition on indiscriminate attack and (3) the rule of proportionality:** As stated in AP I Article 51.5a,²⁷ besieging forces shall identify each military target inside the besieged zone and aim solely towards given targets. “The besieged area must not be considered a single military objective even though it may contain a number of such objectives, and the attacks expected loss of civilian lives, injuries and/or damages to civilian objects cannot be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”²⁸ **(4) Precautionary measures:** As it is contained in AP I Article 57.2,²⁹ a series of precautions must be taken when planning or launching attacks, to guarantee that they do not target civilians or civilian objects, or result in incidental loss of civilian life, injuries and/or damage to civilian objects.

There is videographic evidence of soldiers attacking residential neighborhoods in Daraa as they speak, translated from Arabic, “Hit the residential homes.. yes... burn them burn them burn them burn them all... have him shell the left side now... nice nice this bombardment is beautiful that was nice.” This, among other evidence, shows that not only were the Regime forces and allies violating the rules above mentioned, but that they purposely targeted their attacks at civilians.

B. Starvation and Relief Operations

²⁵ **Art 27 of the 1907 Hague Regulations:** “In sieges and bombardments all necessary steps must be taken to spare, as far as possible, buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals, and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not being used at the time for military purposes.”

²⁶ **AP I Art 51.2:** “The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack. Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited.” **Art 52.1:** “Civilian objects shall not be the object of attack or of reprisals”

²⁷ **AP I Art 51.5a:** “Among others, the following types of attacks are to be considered as indiscriminate: a) an attack by bombardment by any methods or means which treats as a single military objective a number of clearly separated and distinct military objectives located in a city, town, village or other area containing a similar concentration of civilians or civilian objects; and b) [on the rule of proportionality] an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”

²⁸ Chiara-Gillard, Emmanuela “ Sieges, the Law, and Protecting Civilians,” *Chatham House*, June 27, 2019. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-27-Sieges-Protecting-Civilians_0.pdf

²⁹ **AP I Art 57.2:** “With respect to attacks, the following precautions shall be taken: a) those who plan or decide upon an attack shall: i) do everything feasible to verify that the objectives to be attacked are neither civilians nor civilian objects and are not subject to special protection but are military objectives [...], ii) take all feasible precautions in the choice of means and methods of attack with a view to avoiding, and in any event to minimizing, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects; iii) refrain from deciding to launch any attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. b) an attack shall be cancelled or suspended if it becomes apparent that the objective is not a military one or is subject to special protection or that the attack may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated; c) effective advance warning shall be given of attacks which may affect the civilian population, unless circumstances do not permit.”

The ICC Rome Statute Article 8.b.xxv³⁰ defines starvation as a war crime consisting of deliberately “depriving [civilians] of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies.” “Hence, the term ‘starvation’ must be given a broad interpretation, to encompass deprivation not just of food and water but also of other goods essential to survival in a particular context,”³¹ for example medical care in the case of the injured during the siege as a result of the attacks. The siege imposed by the Assad regime blocked 50,000+ people’s access to basic needs - foodstuff, water, medical care and relief supplies during this tightening siege for 77 days, violating the prohibition of starvation not only defined by the ICC Rome Statute as a war crime (to which Syria is not a party to), but also by the AP I Article 54(1) and Rule 53 of the ICRC Customary International Law (CLS) that both clearly state, “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.”

Concerning relief aids, the Assad regime did not allow the access of any form of humanitarian relief operations, violating Article 70 of AP I,³² Article 18.2 of AP II,³³ and Rule 55 of the ICRC,³⁴ that all call on the unimpeded passage of all relief convoys.

³⁰ **ICC Rome Statute: Article 8.b(xxv)** (On war crimes) Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions.

³¹ Chiara-Gillard, Emmanuela “Sieges, the Law, and Protecting Civilians,” *Chatham House*, June 27, 2019. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-27-Sieges-Protecting-Civilians_0.pdf

³² **AP I Art 70:** “[the besieging party] shall allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of all relief consignments, equipment and personnel provided [...] even if such assistance is destined for the civilian population of the adverse Party”

³³ **AP II Art 18.2** If the civilian population is suffering undue hardship owing to a lack of the supplies essential for its survival, such as foodstuffs and medical supplies, relief actions for the civilian population which are of an exclusively humanitarian and impartial nature and which are conducted without any adverse distinction shall be undertaken subject to the consent of the High Contracting Party concerned.

³⁴ **ICRC CLS Rule 55:** “The parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, subject to their right of control.”

6) Policy Recommendations

1. The international community, led by the United States, must take action to cease the siege and military operations of Iran and the Assad regime against civilians in Daraa Al-Balad.
2. The United States and allies must call for an emergency UN Security Council meeting to discuss the situation in Daraa.
3. The United States and United Nations must hold the Russian government accountable for failing to pressure Iran and the Assad regime to uphold the Russian-brokered 2018 agreement.
4. The United States and the international community must prevent the entrenchment of Iran in Southern Syria as it presents a direct threat to the security and interests of our allies in the region.
5. The United States and the international community must ensure that Russia will guarantee safe passage for the civilians forcefully displaced by Iran and the Assad regime.

The abovementioned policy recommendations were proposed as the conflict unfolded.