

A map of Syria showing various regions and cities. A red pushpin is placed on the city of Dar'a. The map includes labels for major cities like Dimashq (Damascus), Irbid, Jarash, and Az Zarqā. It also shows geographical features like the Yarmouk River and several wadis. A semi-transparent red banner is overlaid on the map, containing the main title and subtitle.

NEGOTIATIONS FAIL, VIOLENCE SPREADS, CITIZENS EVACUATE IN DAR'A AL-BALAD

SITUATION REPORT

4 August 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 24 June, the [Syrian government and its allies imposed a military siege on Dar'a al-Balad](#), a residential neighborhood of Dar'a city. Allied forces, including pro-Iranian and Russian-affiliated groups, used light and medium weapons to secure the area and established several checkpoints on the city's outskirts, mainly on the northwestern, western, and northern sides.

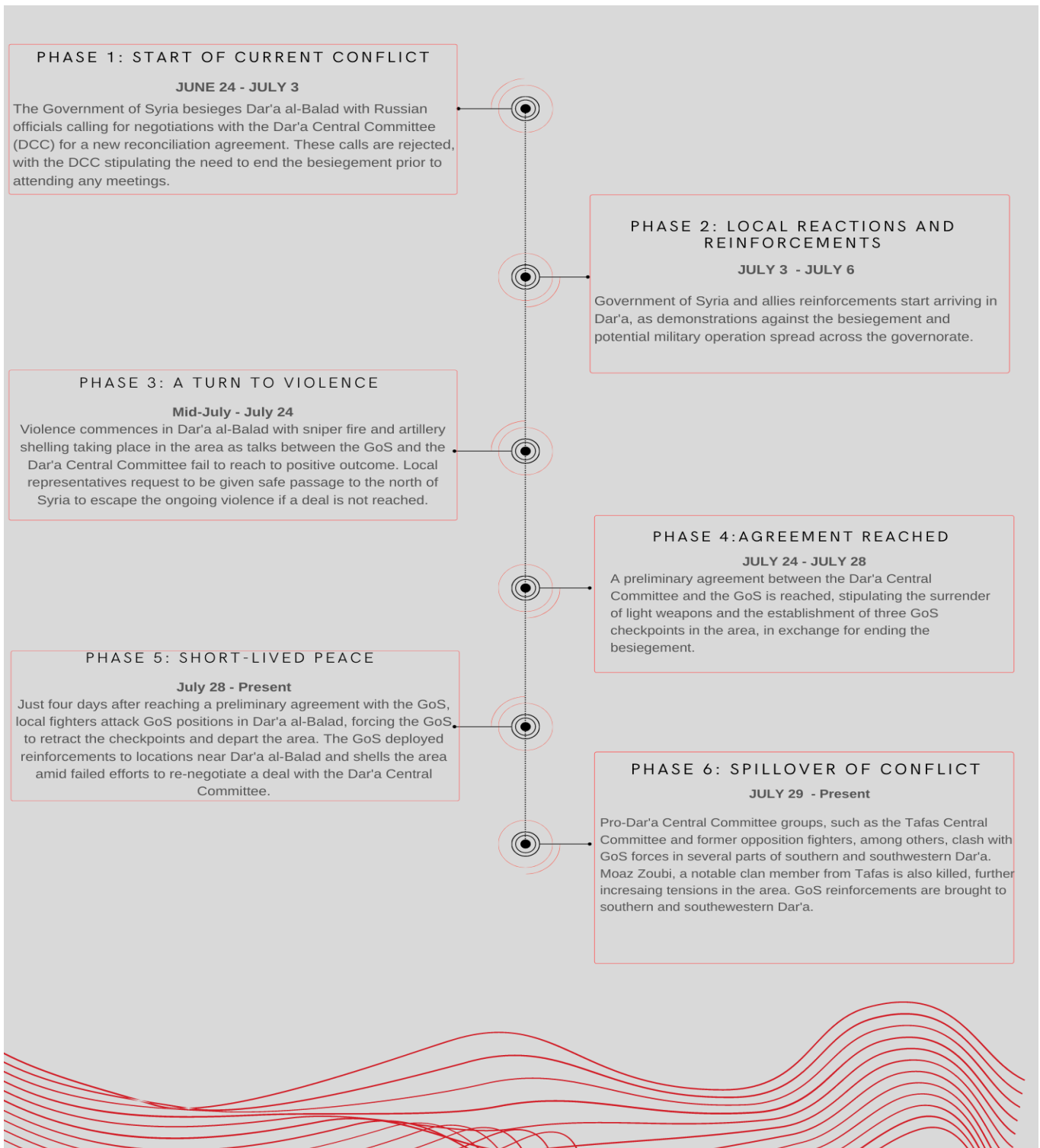
The siege of Dar'a al-Balad began because the Dar'a al-Balad Central Committee refused to meet demands of government allied Russian command in the area. An outbreak of conflict then followed talks between the Dar'a Central Committee and the Syrian government which took place throughout the month of July. On 24 July, local sources indicated that a preliminary agreement was reached to end the siege; terms included the surrender of light weapons to the Syrian government, and the establishment of three Syrian government checkpoints within Dar'a al-Balad. Following the agreement, three Syrian government checkpoints were set up in Dar'a al-Balad by the 4th Armored Division, the Military Intelligence Directorate, and 15th Division Forces, only to be dissolved on 28 July as a result of repeated [attacks](#) on the checkpoints and military vehicles in the area.

Russia is once again playing the role of mediator, with members of its military police [meeting with](#) representatives of the Central Committee in Dar'a al-Balad to discuss local demands, and agreeing to relay these back to Russian leadership. At the same time however, the Syrian government escalated threats of an 'imminent offensive' on the area should locals fail to cooperate and surrender their weapons. These events took place amid [international concerns](#) and calls for an end of the siege.

Due to the increasing hostilities, attempts to resume talks failed. This was followed by [opposition attacks](#) on remaining checkpoints in Dar'a al-Balad, with over 25 government personnel, including high-ranking members of the military, reportedly kidnapped. Since then, violence in Dar'a al-Balad has increased, with spillover events expanding to nearby areas such as ash-Shajara, Tassil, al-Bakkar, Zayzoun, and Tafas, among others. As insecurity continues in the area and with de-escalation talks reaching a dead-end, several tribes from Dar'a al-Balad have requested a '[collective evacuation](#)' from the area, guaranteeing them a safe exit. Sources indicate that talks over a potential mass exodus from Dar'a al-Balad to the opposition-controlled may be on the table.

Once again, negotiations have repeatedly failed between the Syrian government and the Dar'a Central Committee, with Russian mediation proving ineffective, while clashes have spread to several other communities in southern Dar'a. On August 3, the Syrian government once again began shelling Dar'a al Balad -- it is expected that armed conflict in the area will continue.

CONFLICT TIMELINE



MERCY CORPS HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TEAM

NEGOTIATIONS FAIL, VIOLENCE SPREADS, CITIZENS EVACUATE IN DAR'A AL-BALAD

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Dar'a City, situated within Dar'a district, is divided into two parts: the north, Dar'a al-Mahatta, which has been continuously under Syrian government control, and the south, Dar'a al-Balad, which came under opposition control from 2012–2018 during the Syrian conflict. Armed opposition groups emerged in Dar'a in 2012, and [solidified their control](#) over the area in 2013. In 2018, with the help of Russian forces, the Syrian government was able to take back control of the southern governorates of Dar'a and Quneitra. The return of Dar'a was based on a [July 2018](#) reconciliation agreement that unusually, granted local control (rather than central control by Damascus) in exchange for the departure of non-reconciled fighters, the distribution of Russian Military Police in Dar'a al-Balad, the handing over of the Nassib crossing point (connecting Dar'a to Jordan) to Russian authorities, the surrender of heavy and medium weapons, the settlement of status for Syrian Arab Army defectors and individuals wanted for conscription, and the return of displaced civilians to the area.

As part of the 2018 reconciliation agreement, former opposition fighters handed over their heavy weaponry, while thousands of former-opposition fighters were [expelled](#), limiting the possibility for rebellion. While the agreement has officially held, breaches which include Syrian forces [arresting reconciled individuals](#) (who were promised amnesty), and the refusal to [release detainees](#) has led to Dar'a becoming a seedbed for underlying social and political tensions.

Since 2020, the security situation in Dar'a governorate has become increasingly unstable, with sporadic clashes between Syrian government forces and former opposition groups. In January 2021, politically-steered tribal clashes ensued in Tafas, Da'el and Mzeirib subdistricts, north of Dar'a city. These clashes resulted in a [six-day siege on Tafas](#), with soldiers of the Syrian government's Fourth Armored Division attacking the house of former opposition figure Moaz al-Zou'bi, as the Syrian government, with alleged Russian support, carried a crackdown on 'ISIS-affiliated' elements in southwest Dar'a. In February, a [reconciliation deal](#) was reached between Syrian government and the Tafas Central Committee and Russian officials, which resulted in the departure of a number of wanted individuals from the area, the establishment of several Syrian government checkpoints in Tafas, and the resumption of government control of several public sector buildings. The events of Tafas perhaps provided a preview of the fate awaiting Dar'a al-Balad, among other communities within Dar'a governorate.

The newly brokered reconciliation deals, Syrian government sieges, and mini-offensives, combined with Russia's political and military involvement, may be seen as an alternative solution to an all-out offensive for Damascus, in efforts to [consolidate Syrian government and Russian hegemony](#) over the region through a gradual process.

CURRENT SITUATION

Armed stakeholders

To better understand the ongoing events, identifying the key armed stakeholders involved in the current conflict in Dar'a al-Balad and its surrounding areas is key.

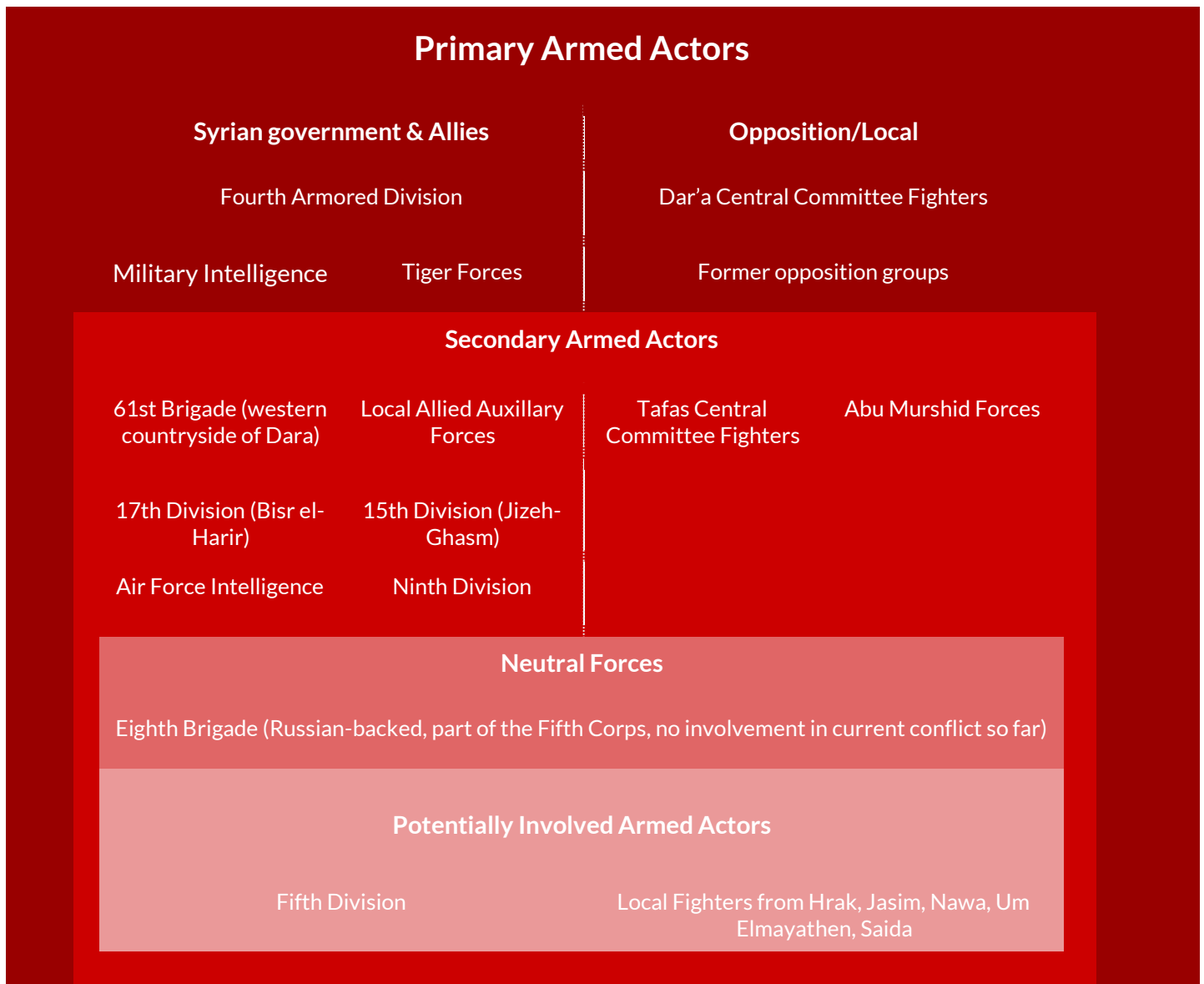


Figure 1: Armed actors in Dar'a governorate

EVENTS IN DAR'A AL-BALAD

The security situation in Dar'a has been critical since 27 July, with significant clashes and shelling taking place in Dar'a al-Balad and later spreading across the governorate. The fighting in the governorate is the result of a failed reconciliation agreement reached three days earlier between the Syrian government and the Dar'a al Balad Central Committee. The collapse of the agreement occurred because of a problem with its implementation: Units from the Syrian Arab Army's 15th Division had entered Dar'a al-Balad as part agreed terms to set up three military positions in three locations pre-approved by the Central Committee (figure 3).

However, while this was happening, former-opposition fighters reportedly clashed with 4th Division soldiers, leading to the government shelling al-Bihar, al-Hamadeen, and al-Sad neighborhoods; several other attacks targeted government positions in Dar'a al-Balad and nearby areas including Ankhil, Saida, Jizah-Ghism Road, and Nawa. Amid the hostilities, the 15th Division withdrew from the checkpoints.

With the consequent collapse of the agreement and deteriorating security, another meeting was held in an attempt to salvage the reconciliation. However, the negotiations ended quickly after the government

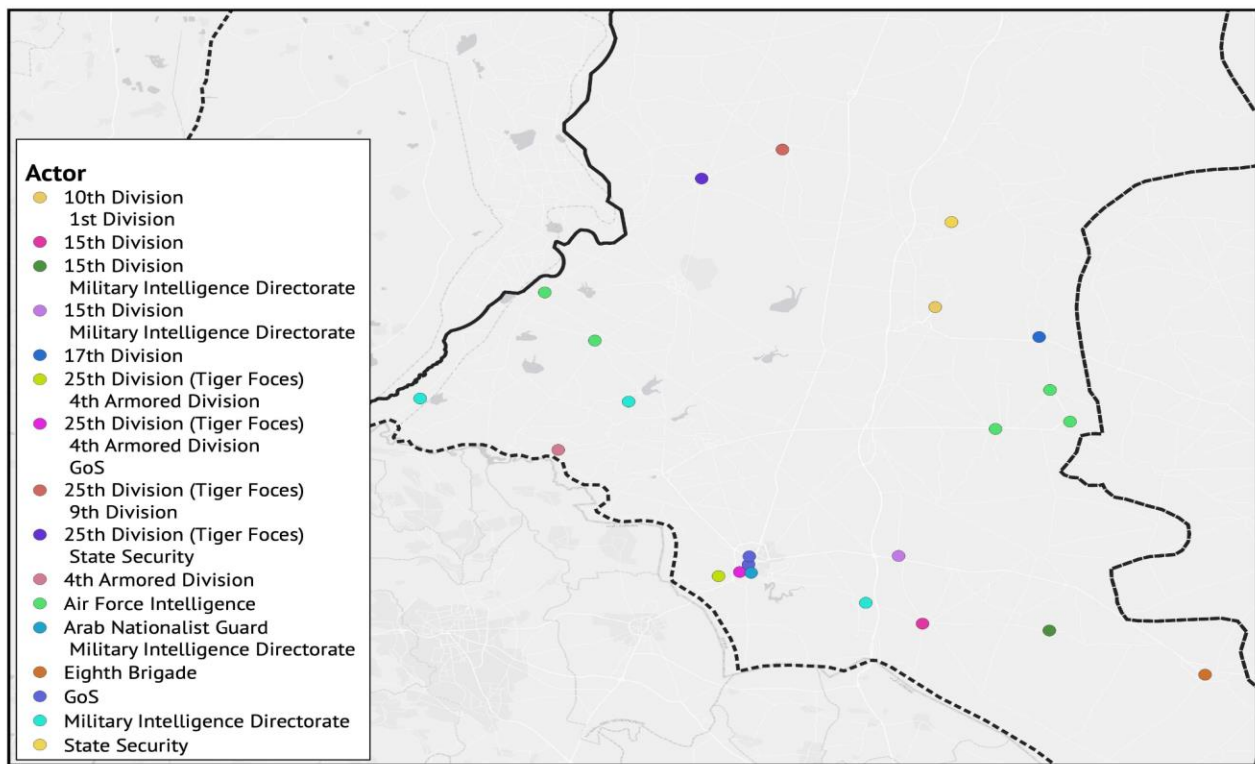


Figure 2: Armed actor positions, Dar'a governorate, 28 July 2021 (Source: Syria HAT)

demanded that, on top of the existing terms, fifteen individuals be made to leave Dar'a al-Balad and that nine, instead of three, positions be set up alongside security branches.

The negotiations' failure resulted in the continuation of the fighting the next day in Dar'a al-Balad. On 28 July, clashes and shelling took place in several neighborhoods including al-Mokhayam and al-Minshiyeh while government surveillance drones were reported flying overhead. The clashes reportedly resulted in the targeting of two government military vehicles resulting in an unknown number of casualties. Moreover, 4th Division snipers stationed around Dar'a al-Balad targeted a [medical clinic](#), forcing it to close down. Government forces later closed down al-Sarayya and al-Sijneh checkpoints, preventing all access into Dar'a al-Balad and controlling all access routes. During the evening, former opposition fighters in Nawa, Tal Shihab, Jasim among other towns and cities declared their solidarity with Dar'a al-Balad, threatening violence if government forces did not step down attacks. Former-opposition fighters executed their threats the next day, resulting in the fighting spilling



Figure 3: Government positions attacked in Dar'a al-Balad on 28 July 2021

over to the governorate's western and eastern countryside. On the evening of 29 July, both sides agreed to establish a [ceasefire](#).

The ceasefire has proved somewhat unstable as clashes and shelling continue in Dar'a al-Balad on a daily basis, while government forces shelled Yadudeh, Mzeireb, and Tal al-Saman near Tafas city on 30 July. In retaliation, former opposition-forces attacked government positions in [As-Sanamayn and Hara](#) on 30 July and [Nawa](#) on 1 August. Since then, government forces have also reportedly [shelled](#) Dar'a al-Balad and former opposition fighters [attacking](#) Da'el, Hara, and Nawa.

In the meantime, attempts at negotiating an agreement continue to fail; since 29 July, two rounds of meetings have taken place, with Russian mediation and with Defence Minister Ali Ayoub as a government representative. Both [meetings](#) reportedly failed to provide any tangible results, and according to reports, the government demands have again increased. The Central Committee must now agree to new government checkpoints and positions stationed inside Dar'a al-Balad, complete disarmament of the area, and that government forces be allowed to conduct house searches. In response, the Central Committee has [suggested](#) that the 15th Division and Military Intelligence, along with the Eighth Brigade, establish positions inside Dar'a al-Balad and that search operations take place in the presence of its own nominated representatives. There is no indication of an agreement as yet.

Spillover of the conflict

The Syrian government may have anticipated that an offensive into Dar'a al Balad would destabilize Dar'a's countryside, particularly the western region near Tafas, Tasil, Ash-Shajarah, and Mzeireb. On 26 July, local and media sources indicated that [Syrian government forces withdrew](#) from a post building located in the center of Tafas city in the western countryside of Dar'a governorate, with no apparent explanation at that time. Also, [a number of Tafas locals were detained](#) by Syrian government forces while passing through the military checkpoint in the Al Dahiya neighborhood at the entrance of Dar'a city, only to be released afterwards. It is worth noting that Syrian government forces entered Tafas in February 2021, following a reconciliation agreement that secured a fragile state stability in the city. Throughout the siege of Dar'a al-Balad, locals in Tafas have [expressed their support](#) to their peers through protests and demonstrations. Syrian government withdrawal in this light might have been a preemptive measure to avoid likely anti-Syrian government attacks in the western Dar'a countryside.

In parallel with the Syrian government offensive on Dar'a al Balad, multiple military operations have been carried out against Syrian government checkpoints in Dar'a's western countryside; on July, 29, media sources indicated that several Syrian government military and security detachments/checkpoints were [captured by opposition fighters](#) in Ash-Shajara, Al Bakkar, Tassil,

Zayzoun Camp, and Al Sa'iqa Camp. These checkpoints were captured either following clashes with Syrian government forces or after the latter's withdrawal from these locations. A number of Syrian government personnel (no accurate figures so far) were held as [hostages](#) in the process. Important developments during these battles include the opposition's capture of the municipal building in Tasil and the [killing of Mo'az al Zou'bi](#), a prominent ex-opposition faction leader from Tafas. As of 2 August, media sources indicate that a government [bombardment](#) continued to target Mzeireb as well as the area between Mzeireb and Yadudeh, at which fierce battles between the Fourth Division and local opposition forces have been taking place. Additionally, [small-scale clashes](#) have taken place in the vicinity of al Salem Compound in Kharab al Shahm town, where Fourth Division members are stationed, with no reported casualties.

The rapid pace and high success rate of anti-government operations in the western countryside suggests that the perpetrators are likely to be former opposition members who possess both fighting experience as well as strong knowledge of the area's geography.

The opposition offensive on Syrian government checkpoints has been met with the bombardment of several towns in Dar'a's western countryside. While estimates of casualties remain unclear at this stage, media sources confirmed that [the village of Al Yadudeh](#) was particularly decimated; as a result of Syrian government bombardment using highly-explosive Elephant missiles; the Horan Free League reported that on July 29, six civilians were killed, including a woman and three children.

As for Dar'a's eastern countryside, Syrian government forces have sustained significant losses. On 29 July, media sources indicated that [opposition fighters captured dozens of Syrian government checkpoints](#) in the towns of Kahil, Saida, and Umm al Mayathin. In the process, an estimated 70 Syrian government soldiers were captured. These hostages will be a key bargaining card in the hands of Dar'a Central Committee and the opposition in general in the ongoing negotiations. Additionally Syrian government forces stationed at a checkpoint between Al-Ghariya and the town of Al-Musaifra and in the town of Alm in the Dar'a countryside have [withdrawn](#), following attacks. Finally, media sources stated that opposition forces belonging to the former Southern Front and Popular Resistance Fighters blocked off [the Damascus-Amman Motorway](#), ten kilometers north of the Nassib Border Crossing with Jordan on 29 July. Currently, there are no reports that the Fifth Corps' Eighth Brigade (the Russian-backed dominant military actor in eastern Dar'a countryside), has intervened in the ongoing conflict, only acting as a mediating party between the conflicting sides.

In Dar'a's northern countryside, anti-government operations have also taken place, but to a lesser extent, mostly due to the strong military presence – the Fifth Division's 12th, 15th, 79th, and 112th Brigades are all stationed in Izra', Ankhal, Sheikh Miskine, and Nawa respectively. Initial reactions

against the Syrian government bombardment of Dar'a al Balad took place in Nawa, where individuals erected roadblocks and set fires on the city's main road on 28 July, according to local sources. On 29 July, media sources indicated that heavy [shooting was reported in the city of Ankhal](#) in the northern countryside of Dar'a governorate, with clashes taking place near the center of the State Security branch in the city centre. During the same day, opposition fighters gained control over multiple checkpoints in the towns of Jasim and Nimr, holding several Syrian government members hostage in the process. In response, Syrian government forces reinforced their presence at the military checkpoints in the city of Jasim and the roads connected with the city and shot artillery at the opposition. Media sources also reported [attacks on the cultural center](#) in Jasim on 29 July, where members of Syrian government's State Security are stationed, with no casualties reported. Additional [reinforcements](#) have arrived in Jasim following the clashes, including an estimated 200 soldiers, artillery pieces and armored vehicles. The reinforcements are deployed near Jasim's cultural center, where there are rumours that the government has also planted mines and placed snipers in the surrounding areas.

As insecurity continues in the area and with de-escalation talks reaching a dead-end, several tribes from Dar'a al-Balad have requested a ['collective evacuation'](#) from the area, guaranteeing them a safe exit, with sources indicating that talks over a potential mass exodus from Dar'a al-Balad to the opposition-controlled northern Syria may be on the table. The tribes' request to leave Dar'a al-Balad is surprising in that many have held firm throughout the conflict and post-conflict periods. However, with the current situation worsening, and government soldiers and pro-government groups possessing significant control over the majority of areas adjacent to Dar'a al-Balad, any opposition continues to be significantly outnumbered – any battles are likely to have only one victor, making an exit in some cases necessary.

ANALYSIS AND FORECASTING

Security analysis and forecasting

The government's requests to establish new security checkpoints in Dar'a al-Balad and to conduct search operations on individuals wanted by Damascus were considered over-reaching, and subsequently met with distrust by the Dar'a Central Committee. At the time of reporting, negotiations between the two sides have failed, and government forces continue to increase their military positions around the neighborhood, with [shelling and clashes continuing](#) on the night of 3 August in Dar'a al-Balad, Nawa, and Mzeirib. Internally in Dar'a al-Balad, sporadic clashes between government forces and local fighters continue to take place, amid a notable spike in the frequency of such incidents. **Figure 3** below showcases the significant increase in the number of security incidents recorded in Dar'a al-Balad,

with the number of incidents doubling from **ten** per week to **twenty** per week over a two-week period. The highest number of incidents, 24, were recorded during the third week of July, and continues to increase at the time of reporting, despite the slight dip during the fourth week of July at the time of the failed negotiations.

Additionally, tensions and clashes continue to take place outside Dar'a al-Balad, with several incidents recorded in [Nawa](#), Saida, [Ankhill](#), Sikh Saad, [Umm al-Mayatheen](#), [Dael](#), [Tafas](#), [Yadudah](#), [Mzeirib](#), al-Harra, and [Jasem](#). Major roads connecting Dar'a al-Balad to central and southern Dar'a have been used for government [reinforcements](#), increasing the risk of traveling on these roads. The recorded increase in insecurity in the aforementioned areas further impedes the arrival of humanitarian aid to southern and central Dar'a, especially Dar'a al-Balad, where thousands of people continue to lack access to basic necessities amid new waves of displacement related to the ongoing conflict.

Concerns are further exacerbated through the rumors of a major security operation, fueled by the arrival of the government's Secretary of Defense to Dar'a Airport, where he [met with representatives](#) of the local security and a delegation of Russian officials. The meeting was followed by the arrival of more reinforcements to Jasem, where government forces also blocked several roads using sand barriers

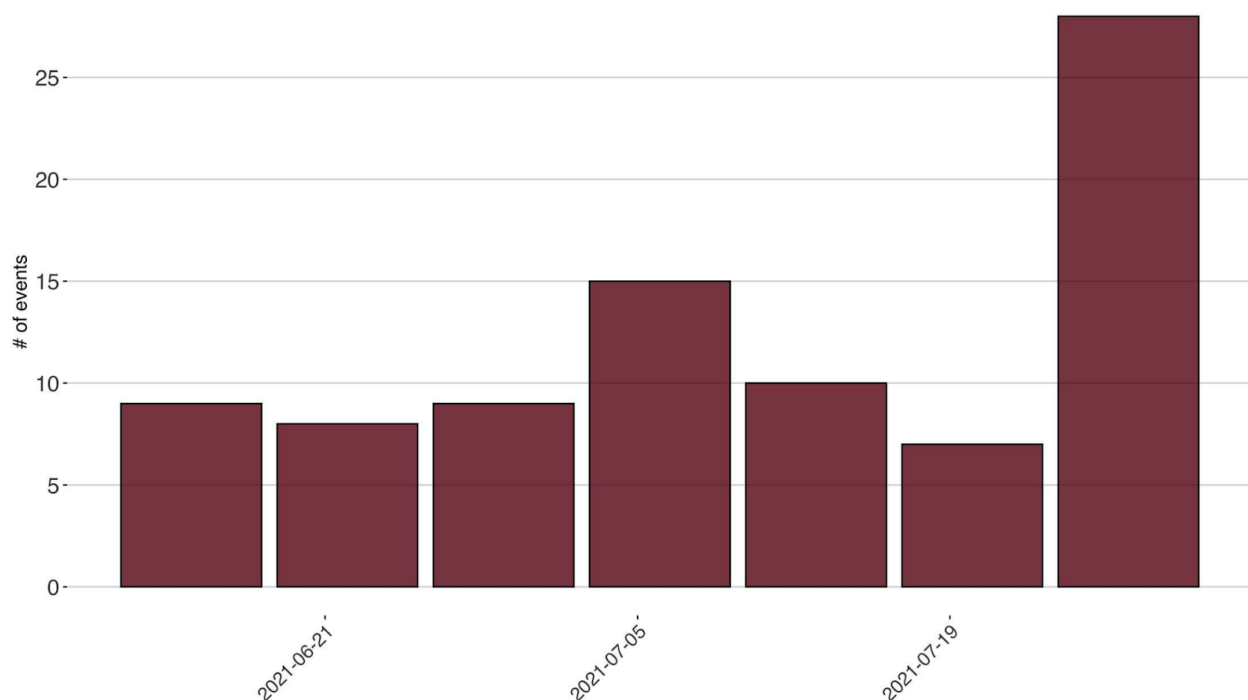


Figure 4: Number of weekly security incidents, June 28-July 29; (Source: Syria HAT's Daily Update Database)

Reinforcements in southwest Dar'a, following the spillover of the conflict from Dar'a al-Balad, indicates the government's unwillingness to retract its demands. With the Dar'a Central Committee again rejecting reconciliation on 2 August, insecurity in and around Dar'a al-Balad is expected to continue.

Displacement Trends

The fighting across Dar'a has resulted in large-scale displacement from the governorate, particularly from Dar'a al-Balad. UNOCHA have [reported](#) that 24,000 people (around 43% of Dar'a al-Balad's population) have been displaced as of 2 August to neighboring towns and neighborhoods. The displaced families are mainly hosted by local families, while several hundred individuals are residing in two collective shelters. Humanitarian aid, including food, healthcare, water, sanitation and hygiene services and non-food items are also being provided by humanitarian agencies.

Moreover, local sources have reported on a shortage of food and medicine in Dar'a al-Balad due to the siege in addition to the few medical facilities in the neighborhood being put [out of order](#) due to the fighting, making health care inaccessible for Dar'a al-Balad residents both in and outside of their neighborhoods.

The fighting has also affected areas adjacent to Dar'a al-Balad which the government is using as a staging ground for its attacks. Syrian government forces, [particularly the 4th Division](#), have [taken over](#) farmlands in the Khashbe, Chiyeh, and Gharaz areas south and southeast of the neighborhood, as a launching pad for the attacks and artillery strikes in their ongoing siege (Shown in figure 4). Government forces have allegedly [trapped](#) more than 250 families living in these areas, depriving them of food, water, and medicine and means of communication. On 2 August, the Eighth Brigade reportedly sent a convoy to [extract](#) the trapped families living in the Chiyeh area. Families in the remaining areas received food and water after local Military Intelligence commander Imad Abu Zreik allowed food trucks to enter. Local sources later stated that the remaining families are still being subjected to abuse by 4th Division forces, while other government forces have reportedly arrested several families, abused residents, and reportedly [executed](#) one man. The fate of some of the families arrested remains unknown.

Finally, displacement was also reported in the western Dar'a countryside. Local sources reported that approximately 100 families from Yadudeh left for Tal Shihab and Zayzun, particularly after the Syrian shir range, highly explosive elephant missiles were [fired](#) at the township killing six residents including one woman and three children. Dozens of families have also left Tafas for Da'el after the city was [shelled](#) with mortars and former-opposition leader Moa'z al-Zoubi was [killed](#) fighting government forces on the city's outskirts.

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The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. Successful humanitarian and development interventions require a nuanced and objective understanding of the human ecosystems in which these interventions occur. To this end, the HAT's most important function is to collect, triangulate, synthesize, analyze and operationalize disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly nimble, adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the Syrian conflict

