



Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Crisis

Samer Bakkour

To cite this article: Samer Bakkour (2022) Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Crisis, Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 16:2, 225-242, DOI: [10.1080/25765949.2022.2099025](https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2022.2099025)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2022.2099025>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 509



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



ARTICLE



OPEN ACCESS



Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Crisis

Samer Bakkour

Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT

Daraa City is widely known as the birthplace of the Syrian uprising. The uprising, which was initially motivated by high-minded ideas and opposition to the arbitrary violence of an authoritarian state, rapidly degenerated into a civil war orientated by external agendas and priorities. In this paper, I want to situate Daraa governorate at the centre of this development, with the intention of highlighting how the course of events in this small part of Syria had vital implications for the development of the Syrian Civil War. In seeking to develop an analysis of the interplay of internal dynamics and external influences, I seek to 'reconcile' the 'micro' and 'macro' dimensions of civil war, and also draw on contributions to the peacebuilding literature, and this enables me to reconceptualise the relationship between 'internal' and 'external' drivers of conflict.

KEYWORDS

Syrian war; Daraa; international interference; internationalisation; radicalisation; regional; sectarianism

1. Introduction

The Syrian Civil War was initially a local uprising and later became internationalised, to the point of taking on the appearance of a proxy war. The uprising also initially emerged as a reaction against authoritarian rule, and it was only later that it developed a sectarian dimension. As the objective character of the conflict changed, so too did Syrian society, and it was transformed by lasting, economic, political, and social change. As the uprising spread from Daraa to other regions of the country, the regional and international focus shifted. For example, in the northeast and east of the country, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) dominated by the Kurdish *Yeketini Parastini Gel* (YPG) enjoyed a long period of relative autonomy. More recently, the emphasis has shifted to the north-west of the country (Idlib and western Aleppo governorates) (*Muhafathat*), where the final act of this tragedy is waiting to be played out. At the end of 2019, Government forces, with the support of Russian and Iranian allies, had pushed to within 40 km of Idlib city, raising the prospect that the final act of this drawn-out drama may be in sight.

CONTACT Samer Bakkour ✉ s.bakkour@exeter.ac.uk 📍 Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Although the victory of the Syrian authorities has not yet formally been announced, this is essentially a formality that will be concluded in due course. The Syrian authorities successfully contained the uprising, and this raises the question of how this was achieved. In the literature, there is an overwhelming tendency to focus on the role of the Syrian army and to even present it as the 'king maker' or determinant of the change or survival of the Syrian authorities. This overemphasis on the military has frequently been accompanied by an overemphasis on the sectarian dimension. However, this is not to deny that the dominance of Alawi sect officers and the status of the Syrian military as a 'combined military' (which represents a specific ethnic group rather than the entire nation) served to alienate public opinion.¹

However, the discussion of the military should acknowledge its relationship with political authority and should not simply create the impression that the Syrian state was sustained entirely through force. On the contrary, the clientelism of the Syrian authorities extended far into society and established a basis on which it could sustain itself.

In shifting the discussion beyond the limited subject of the military's ability to exert force, I instead propose to consider how the military is integrated into the country's internal governance. This is particularly important because the Syrian authorities have not only sustained itself through military force and has instead developed a clear political approach that is part of its survival strategy. Heydemann speaks, in this sense, of the Syrian authorities' 'adaptive authoritarianism', and ability to respond to events.² Heydemann, for instance, discusses the omnipresence of Syria's security apparatus and its encroachment on everyday life.³ Hinnebusch, meanwhile, highlights the role of the Baath party in Syria,⁴ although he does also recognise the role of the military in enhancing the Syrian authorities' resilience.⁵ These contributions however focus on Syria in general, and this is one of the main contributions of this paper – namely to provide a neglected regional dimension by highlighting how Daraa impacted the more general trajectory of the crisis.

While the crisis initially derived from internal sources (micro), the external dimension (macro) became more important as it progressed, and this is a point that Soest and Gleditsch make in their discussion of the externalisation of the conflict.⁶ However, these accounts do not provide a real sense of the progression of the crisis or its movement through different stages. For example, while Baroot⁷ and Bishara⁸ engage with the start of the crisis, their discussion ends in 2012 and 2013, and so they do not

¹R. Hinnebusch, 'What went wrong: understanding the trajectory of Syria's conflict', quoted in: L. Matar and A. Kadri, eds., *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), pp. 215–233.

²S. Heydemann, *Syria's Adaptive Authoritarianism*. In *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Project on Middle East Political Science, Washington DC, 2013), pp. 54–58.

³S. Heydemann, *War, Institutions, and Social Changes in the Middle East* (University of California, 2000).

⁴R. Hinnebusch and D. Lesch, 'Syrian Arab Republic', quoted in M. Gasiorowski ed., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (U.S.: Westview Press, 2013), p. 266.

⁵R. Hinnebusch, 'Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?' *International Affairs* 88(1), (2012), pp. 95–113.

⁶K. S. Gleditsch, *All International Politics is Local: The Diffusion of Conflict, Integration, and Democratization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

⁷M. Barout, *Syria in the Last Decade: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2012).

⁸A. Bishara, *Syria: The Path of Pain towards Freedom - An Attempt in Current History* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 311.

recognise how these initial phases are linked to later developments. Daniel Corstange and Erin York, recognise the role of sectarianism, along with the fact that it became an active consideration in the later phases of the conflict, but also maintain that its influence is contingent on other factors.⁹ For Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, however, the concept is an obstacle to analysis, and they suggest it is just as important to focus on divisions and divides within groups. In other words, 'Sunni' and 'Shia' are general categories that are effectively superimposed and which only provide a starting point for analysis. It is this sense that both authors speak of a need to go 'beyond sectarianism'.¹⁰

This paper is not intended to provide an overarching perspective of this kind; rather, it is primarily intended to provide insight into the initial and final stages of the crisis, which have been frequently overlooked in western journalistic and academic commentary. In particular, it addresses subsequent externalisation, including increased Iranian and Russian influence. Another unique aspect of its contribution is that it focuses on events in Daraa Governorate in the period between 2011 and 2020. The initial stages of the crisis are crucial, as they relate to the transition from general resistance and the militarisation of the conflict. This militarisation, and its corollary of securitisation, was assiduously manipulated by the Syrian authorities, and this established a basis for the emergence and consolidation of external and sectarian agendas. Accordingly, this paper should be read alongside other academic contributions that consider the later phases and dimensions of the crisis.

Another unique aspect of this paper is that the role of Daraa has been, aside from general references to children, scrawling graffiti on a school wall ('the people want to overthrow the regime) largely overlooked. This is particularly important as the governorate has a unique significance in the crisis, and it should be appreciated both in terms of the initial uprising and later processes, such as securitisation and externalisation. In focussing on this specific regional dimension, we can therefore gain a new understanding of the general dynamics of the crisis.

In this paper, I will repeatedly refer to the internal (micro) and external (macro) dimensions of the situation in Daraa City and Governorate, while taking care to highlight the various ways in which they are interlinked and intertwined. In the initial stages of the crisis, I suggest, 'local' actors and dynamics were at the forefront, while in the later stages, external actors and agendas predominated, often to the direct detriment of 'local' agendas and priorities. The terms in which we understand and analyse conflict are related to this internal-external dichotomy. By way of illustration, the concept of 'sectarianism' was, from the start of the conflict, often an external imposition that impeded meaningful analysis. Its blanket application therefore concealed the socio-economic dimensions of the conflict (between a wealthy ruling elite and marginalised communities) and conflicts that were internal to Islam (between 'moderate' and more 'extreme' variations of Islamism). This point notwithstanding, we should not dispose entirely of 'sectarianism,' as it is clear that sectarian identity has been a feature

⁹D. Corstange and E. York, 'Sectarian framing in the civil war', *American Journal of Political Science* 62(2), (2018), pp. 441–455.

¹⁰B. Berti and J. Paris, 'Beyond sectarianism: geopolitics, fragmentation and the Syrian civil war', *Strategic Assessment* 16(4), (2014), pp. 21–34.

of the conflict, and so has the emergence of greater homogeneity of sects and religious groups in the country. However, we should first recognise that the politicisation of religion has been an aspect of the conflict and does not therefore, by implication, explain the crisis in its entirety.

2. Theoretical Approach

Jack S. Levy observes that in the theorisation of war internal factors have long been taken into account. In providing examples, he cites Immanuel Kant's Democratic Peace Thesis, which, in asserting that democratic states do not go to war with each other, establishes the state's *domestic* arrangements as defining its international actions and relations. In discussing how democracy can promote peace, Levy distinguishes between democratic norms and institutional constraints.¹¹ Whereas the former is more concerned with culture, the latter instead relates to the practical constraints that democracy imposes on individual leaders. Theories that emphasise the role of the individual leader in war can also be described as 'internal' in focus and emphasis, and they can in turn be clearly distinguished from more systemic theories (e.g. neo-Realism).

However, these internal factors are discussed with reference to conflict between states, or international conflict. The theorisation of *intra-state* conflict, which has emerged as a foremost challenge and priority for the international community relatively recently, therefore necessitates a different theoretical framework of reference. Florea distinguishes a correlational approach (that focuses on country-level structural factors) and a bargaining counterpart that concentrates on the strategic interaction between disputing parties.

After examining both approaches and highlighting their respective weaknesses and shortcomings, Florea proposes an alternative that links a structural factor (such as a crisis of internal state legitimacy) to radicalisation and militarisation. In proposing that the emphasis should be shifted from variables to mechanisms, he cites Della Porta's observation that mechanisms are 'chains of interaction that filter structural conditions and produce effects.'¹² This shift away from variables, and the associated notion of causation, produces a range of methodological issues. However, Florea argues this is compensated by the fact that they are 'likely to provide greater analytical purchase than static correlational analyses or theoretically indeterminate bargaining frameworks.'¹³

What Florea describes as his 'alternative, contentious' framework for studying civil war therefore provides the first component of my theoretical approach. I accordingly propose to focus on radicalisation and militarisation in Daraa in the relevant period. An article by Laia Balcells and Patricia Justino has influenced the second part. In this contribution, they highlight the problems that arise when analysts seek to engage civil

¹¹J. Levy, 'Theories and causes of war', quoted in: C. J. Coyne and R. L. Mather, eds., *The Handbook on the Political Economy of War*, chapter 2 (UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), p. 22.

¹²R. Florea, 'Stakeholders interests analyse and harmonization - starting point of strategic approach', *Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition* 16 (1), (2013), p. 3.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 21.

war on a single level, and this leads them to highlight the importance of the 'macro-micro,' both as an empirical phenomenon and analytical device.

As they note, there is an established literature that considers micro-level processes such as group formation and interaction, the internal organisation of armed groups and the emergence of violent collective action. However, as they note, little effort has been made to consider these processes in relation to macro-level dynamics.¹⁴ In distinguishing different levels of analysis, they identify the state, rather than the international level, as the 'macro level' of analysis. While the state's legitimacy, or lack thereof, may provide the basis for the civil conflict, this violence does not exist in isolation but is instead anticipated by prior violence, as Johan Galtung's concept of 'structural violence' makes clear.¹⁵

This article builds on the oversight of 'micro' dimension and instead applies it to the divide between the international and 'local' levels of analysis. It is therefore intended to complement previous contributions that examine how the formal/informal and state/social interact in internal conflict processes.¹⁶ As they note, there is an established literature that considers micro-level processes such as group formation and interaction, the internal organisation of armed groups and the emergence of violent collective action. However, as they note, little effort has been made to consider these processes in relation to macro-level dynamics.¹⁷ From this perspective, the concept of 'civil war' appears immediately problematic, as it predisposes the observer to think of the conflict as an internal matter, and implicitly understates the various ways in which external actors may be implicated in conflict dynamics.

However, I would suggest that the issue is actually the terms in which they theorise 'macro,' which does not take the external or 'international' into account. The importance of this oversight is further confirmed when we consider the literature on peacebuilding theory. Björklund and Höglund interpret the frictions of peacebuilding in relation to the international-local relationship, which is significant as the predominant tendency is to theorise these difficulties in relation to the domestic level, which is cast as the object of reform. For Campbell, peacebuilding is a matter of strategic management that is effectively the agency of local actors. In this manner, 'top-down' is reinvented as 'bottom-up'.¹⁸ David Chandler, meanwhile, takes this thesis a step further when he speaks of 'empire in denial'.¹⁹ As in Campbell's account, however, peacebuilding is rendered as deeply coercive and as being concerned with the management of the subaltern.

These accounts however fall into the Critical branch of the peacebuilding literature, and therefore challenge the received wisdom which holds that peacebuilding seeks to establish the basis on which a self-sustaining domestic authority can be established. This establishes a clear division between the 'domestic' and 'external' and also, in accordance with established sovereign norms, defines the former in terms of the

¹⁴K. Gleditsch, *All International Politics is Local: The Diffusion of Conflict, Integration, and Democratization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

¹⁵J. Galtung, *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹⁶B. D. Guevara, 'Introduction: the limits of state building and the analysis of state formation', *Journal of Intervention and State building* 4(2), (2010), pp. 111–128.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁸S. Campbell, 'Constructing top-down as bottom-up: the governmental co-option of peacebuilding 'from below'', *Explorations in Anthropology* 11(1), (2011), pp. 39–56.

¹⁹D. Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of Peacebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2006).

absence of the latter. These accounts however divert from this consensus by stressing the various ways in which the 'external' continues to be part of the 'internal,' even after the basis for a self-sufficient political authority is established. This is precisely the point that Bickerton makes when he speaks of an 'unholy alliance' against sovereignty.²⁰ The key point here is that international intervention is based upon, and is ultimately justified in relation to, the premise of a sovereign, self-sustaining authority. However, this is not an accurate description of the products of post-conflict peace-building as, in various ways and aspects, the 'internal' continues to be subject to various forms of external guidance and mediation.

Indeed, this is entirely to be expected, as the act of intervention is, in the first instance, predicated upon the understanding that the domestic context is somehow aberrant and conflict-prone; by implication, reform must, at least in the initial stages of intervention, come from external sources, as in the case of UN transitional authorities established in contexts such as East Timor.²¹ We can apply this insight to conflict processes by considering how external 'drivers' of conflict are part of what ostensibly appear to be 'domestic' or 'internal' processes. To the same extent, we can speak of the 'internal' as part of the 'external,' and understand the two as being conjoined in a mutually constitutive relationship. Therefore, civil war is only intelligible in terms of the wider context and the interventions of external actors at specific points and junctures. To put it more succinctly, 'civil war' is, in crucial aspects and dimensions, part of the international system. External actors are not, per conventional representations of peacebuilding, positioned as benevolent external parties concerned with the resolution of violent conflict but are, in many different respects, clearly implicated in conflict dynamics.

Duffield, for example, critically assesses the phenomenon of so-called 'new' wars in the wider context of emerging trends and tendencies in global politics. Here he inverts the institution of sovereignty by presenting it as a basis on which the 'domestic' is integrated into a wider system that seeks to subtly condition and mould its form and agency. This, it should be noted, challenges the assumption that intervention is a single act and it also undermines the premise that sovereignty can be defined as the absence or limitation of external interference. On the contrary, Duffield speaks of intervention as the precursor to an extensive range of interventions and also defines sovereignty as a flexible and continually mutating relation rather than as a fixed and unchanging attribute.²²

Bickerton, for example, discusses how external actors are implicated in the failure of state building interventions. In his view, the burden of responsibility does not rest on local actors for failing to adhere to the sanctified axioms of state building, but rather rests on the external parties that seek to 'export' state building models of conflict-affected contexts.²³ This is of course at odds with the model of 'light touch' intervention, which in

²⁰P. Cunliffe, P. and A. Gourevitch, 'Introduction: the unholy alliance against sovereignty in Bickerton', quoted in P. Cunliffe, P. and A. Gourevitch, eds., *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (London: UCL Press, 2007), pp. 1–19.

²¹J. Chopra, 'The UN's Kingdom of East Timor, survival', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 42(3), (2000), pp. 27–40.

²²M. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (New York: Zed Books, 2001).

²³P. Cunliffe and A. Gourevitch, 'Introduction: the unholy alliance against sovereignty in Bickerton', quoted in P. Cunliffe and A. Gourevitch, eds., *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (London: UCL Press, 2007), pp. 1–19.

upholding 'local' agency, ultimately also makes domestic actors responsible for the success or failure of peacebuilding or state building interventions. Indeed, it should be recognised that Bickerton's account, in presenting external intervention as the determinant of success or failure, is actually an inversion of the prevailing model of intervention.

Incidentally, at different stages of the conflict, external actors have positioned themselves as advocates of peace, both in the Geneva and Astana talks. In order to take this proposition seriously, it is necessary to overlook or deny the fact that they have exerted a strong influence over the different stages and general outline of the conflict. Similarly, we are also required to view the Syrian conflict as essentially internal and in need of benevolent external mediation and oversight. While it might seem incredible that we are even invited to entertain this proposition, it should be remembered that we are speaking in a wider context in which the concept of 'peace' has become so devalued as to be meaningless or, even worse, a justification for assorted forms of direct and indirect violence.

A number of important implications can be extracted from the preceding theoretical discussion and applied to the subsequent discussion of the Daraa uprising. First, conflict should be understood in relation to the internal-external relationship, and should not be engaged or understood as a purely internal phenomenon. Second, analysis should not proceed on the basis of the assumption that external actors are predisposed to, or actively seek, an active resolution of the conflict: on the contrary, it is instead to be assumed that they are implicated, both directly and indirectly, in conflict dynamics. Third, violence is an aspect or dimension of the internal-external relationship and should not therefore be understood as an aberration or departure from established international norms.

3. The Cumulative, Random and Direct Causes in Daraa's Uprising

In this study, I propose to focus on Daraa Governorate,²⁴ whose significance has, in following years, largely been eclipsed by the pace of events. Assad's neo-liberal reforms of the early 2000s aggravated pre-existing problems in the governorate, and this contributed to it emerging as a hotbed of popular protest. The redistribution of wealth from lower to higher income classes was politically significant, as it alienated the (Sunni) majority in the governorate. Transformation to the market economy ultimately alienated the majority Sunni sect, as there was a regressive redistribution of wealth (from lower to higher income).²⁵ The gap between a rich minority and the general population increased pressures on the unresponsive political system,²⁶ as there

²⁴Daraa: is located in the south of the country and extends from the border with Jordan to the Damascus countryside in the north, and from Quntiera and the occupied Golan in the west to As-Suwayda in the east. It is administratively divided into three regions, specifically the Daraa, Izraa and As Sanamayn areas, and had a population of more than 1.5 million before 2011. Its strategic importance meant that it was always likely to become part of the conflict. The governorate was the southern gateway to the capital and it borders Quntiera and Suwayda Governorates and is adjacent to the strategically vital Golan Heights. The city has also historically been a 'bread basket' for the southern region in general and Damascus in particular and it has also, because of its proximity to border areas, been an important source of financial income for the Syrian authorities. 'City profile of Daraa,' Un Habitat, (June 2014).

²⁵L. Matar and A. Kadri, *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

²⁶A. Bishara, *Syria: The Path of Pain towards Freedom - An Attempt in Current History* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 311.

was increased competition for (dwindling) public resources, growing social inequality and the population became more socio-economically isolated. Public frustrations were further exacerbated by ostentatious displays of wealth by senior members of the security establishment and businessmen aligned with the Syrian authorities.²⁷

The drought was a cumulative factor in the protests of 2011, and devastating drought between 2003 and 2009 also drove thousands of villagers into Daraa city. The response of the political authorities was ineffectual, and included withdrawing rural subsidies for the diesel fuel required to power irrigation batteries.²⁸ Uncontrolled growth also created problems and internal migration driven by employment in the agricultural sector resulted in slums accounting for 12 percent of the city's area. Limited economic growth also had a small impact on the local economy, health sector and society, and the uneven and insufficient economic growth was reflected in high levels of unemployment and poverty, particularly among young people.²⁹ Although religion was most frequently used as an explanation in the aftermath of the uprising, these socio-factors were also important, and this is consistent with the greed vs. grievance thesis put forward by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler.³⁰ The Daraa uprising developed when the Syrian authorities were unable to meet the challenges of evolving local situations. Caught in cross-pressures between domestic class structures and the Syrian authorities, the uprising opened the way for social transformations spearheaded by revolts from below. In the absence of an effective response by the political authorities, social actors came to the forefront, including Daraa's clans, who rejected injustice and corruption: all Syrians are aware of the fear created by the Horanic tribes and the chivalry of their Darawi counterparts.³¹

The wider wave of protests across the world, especially in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, directly influenced the protests in Daraa. Activists and young people took to social media to issue calls to mobilise for democratic rights and freedoms, and protests broke out on 15 March 2011. Holger Albrecht focussed on the integration of the army into politics and the overrepresentation of the Syrian authorities in the military.³² Moreover, Eva Bellin highlights the extent to which high-ranking officers are invested in the survival of the Syrian authorities.³³ After protests then escalated, the Syrian authorities sent an official committee to Daraa to look at their demands, which included the dismissal of the head of the Political Security Branch and the Governor of Daraa, the expulsion of Rami Makhlouf's (Assad's cousin) companies from the region, the initiation of political reform, and the return of veiled teachers who had previously

²⁷M. Barout, *Syria in the Last Decade: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2012), p. 71.

²⁸R. Hinnebusch, 'What went wrong: understanding the trajectory of Syria's conflict', quoted in: L. Matar and A. Kadri, eds., *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), p. 35.

²⁹T. Anderson, 'Daraa: Syria's Islamist insurrection in disguise', *Global Research* (July 2015).

³⁰P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, 'Greed and grievance in civil war', *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, (2004), pp. 563–595.

³¹M. Barout, *Syria in the Last Decade: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2012), p. 21.

³²H. Albrecht, 'Does coup-proofing work? Political-military relations in authoritarian regimes amid the Arab Uprisings', *Mediterranean Politics* 20, (2015), pp. 36–54.

³³E. Bellin, 'Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: lessons from the Arab Spring', *Comparative Politics* 44(2), (2012), pp. 127–149.

been dismissed from their positions. They also called for the abolition of unfair laws related to trade in lands (including laws 48 and 26) and reduced fuel prices.³⁴

However, these demands were not addressed.³⁵ Nevertheless, a partial concession was forthcoming -- however, this was in large part a reaction to the fear that unrest could spread to other parts of the country. However, this concession was insufficient, and a further escalation occurred on 20 March 2011, when protestors burned the Palace of Justice to the ground and toppled a statue of Hafez al-Assad, drawing indiscriminate live fire from the security forces. This is why Amy Holmes and Kevin Koehler maintain that the primary focus on the military has been harmful, as it has diverted attention away from other parts of the Syrian authorities and, by implication, the subtleties and nuances of an 'adaptive' response. Here it should be remembered that even authoritarian regimes historically rested on some degree of public support. As we will see, the Syrian authorities are no exception in this regard.³⁶

A further important development occurred when Sunni socio-political thought became increasingly sophisticated and adjusted to these shifting political circumstances: Sufi and Salafi sheikhs and the Muslim Brotherhood made a particularly important in contesting the legitimacy of the Syrian authorities. Tribal solidarity (*Fazaa*) was another essential resource that helped to sustain the struggle, as was previous coordination between supporters of the Socialist Union, Communist Action, and Muslim Brotherhood, which established a basis for the popular movements that later emerged. These resources gained an added value from the fact that the political authorities failed to effectively counteract them.³⁷

4. Militarisation of Resistance

After the protests became militarised and insurgents took the lead in the resistance, army operations began a military operation on 25 April 2011 that was initially supposed to be limited, but which later expanded to include all areas of the city.³⁸ This confirmed that while the Syrian authorities were willing to enter into negotiations, they were unwilling to countenance opposition of any kind.³⁹ These initial engagements later established a basis for military operations against the regular security and military forces. However, Daraa was not easy for the Opposition to control, and this was in large part attributable to the fact that Daraa's large military barracks contained one-third of the Syrian authorities' military units, who were positioned on the frontline of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This preponderance of military power was a major challenge that confronted the Opposition in the initial stages of the uprising. Resource limitations were however partially overcome when army members passed rifles and military uniforms on.⁴⁰

³⁴M. Barout, *Syria in the Last Decade: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform*, pp. 183–185.

³⁵Amnesty, 'Syria Death Toll climbs as Protests Spread', Relief Web, (September 2020).

³⁶A. Holmes and K. Koehler, 'Myths of military defection in Egypt and Tunisia', *Mediterranean Politics* 25(1), (2020), pp. 45–70.

³⁷A. Bishara, *Syria: The Path of Pain towards Freedom - An Attempt in Current History* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 81.

³⁸R. Erlich, *Inside Syria* (Prometheus Books: New York, 2014), p. 15.

³⁹Syrian Foundation for Studies and Public Opinion Research, 'Daraa, a story of a revolution: from peacefulness to the current reality', Opinion Research, (February 2017).

⁴⁰'Which Syrians do not know', Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, (May 2018).

When an armed group is built around an overarching ideology,⁴¹ this ideology can shape the patterns of battle. The micro approach as the processes of conflict and violence that took place at the level of the sovereign state,⁴² has been applied in Daraa. Islamist factions began to appear in Daraa, after insurgents expressed a desire to receive armaments and financial supplies. They initially established the 'Muthana Movement' and then committed to the horizontal spread of jihadist ideology in the belief that this was the most effective way that the political authorities could be confronted.⁴³ The political authorities sought to Sectarianism for their own purposes, which combines ethnic, religious and tribal aspects, and it became an established part of a survival strategy.⁴⁴ Daraa already had an established sectarian dimension, and this was likely to further inflame during sustained conflict.⁴⁵ While the mobilisation of Shia supporters was essential to the survival of the political authorities, it was also part of a deliberate attempt to discredit protestors as violent fanatics.⁴⁶ In addition to functioning as a tool of elite mobilisation, sectarianism also established a rational basis for resource competition.⁴⁷ This is of course consistent with the insight that sectarian identities are (socially) constructed in relation to an 'other' and are, more often than not, essentially imposed by internal or external actors (the micro and macro approaches).

McAdam observed how a state legitimacy creates an 'opportunity structure' for organised collective action. Obviously, not all such crises will result in civil war, and it is only through the processes of radicalisation and militarisation that this occurs. For Florea, understanding civil war in these terms both necessitates and provides a broader perspective that does not, by implication, view it as a 'one shot' event. As he notes, it 'allows the investigator to focus on the process that produces civil war, not just on the event itself.'⁴⁸ In the case of Daraa, this is particularly important as it enables insight into the link between non-violent protest and violent oppositional struggle. In July 2011, the Syrian authorities released hundreds of jihadists and facilitated the flow of weapons across the Jordanian border. Incidentally, the Syrian authorities had been playing this game well before 2011, and had an established history of using sectarian tensions to consolidate their own power in the governorate.⁴⁹ Jihadist

⁴¹Ideology: Ideology has been defined in countless ways, Here I use it to mean a 'coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs or values through which people 'posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order'. through which people 'posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order'. J. Gerring, 'Ideology: a definitional analysis', *Political Research Quarterly* 50(4), 1997, pp. 957–994; M. Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin 1976), p. 959.

⁴²L. Balcells and Justino, 'Bridging micro and macro approaches on civil wars and political violence: issues, challenges, and the way forward', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (8), (2014), pp. 1343–1359.

⁴³Interviews with Free Syrian Army Members, (January 2021).

⁴⁴P. Lawrence, *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf* (first Ed) (UK: Hurst, 2014).

⁴⁵F. James and D. Latin. 'Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity', *International Organization* 54 (4), (2000), p. 845–877.

⁴⁶Paulo, *The Shattered Nation*, p. 131.

⁴⁷D. Smith, 'Trends and causes of armed conflict', Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, (2001), pp. 1–14.

⁴⁸R. Florea, 'Stakeholders interests analyse and harmonization - starting point of strategic approach', *Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition* 16 (1), (2013), p. 23.

⁴⁹F. Lawson, 'Why did the Syrian uprising become a sectarian conflict? A provisional synthesis', *Politics, Religion & Ideology* (21), (2020), pp. 216–231.

members and the Al-Nusra Front in particular, became increasingly prominent in the resistance, in no small part because of rising civilian deaths. Al-Nusra called on Daraa's inhabitants to flee and, with financial support from Saudi Arabia and logistical support from Jordan, battalions began to be created in rural areas.⁵⁰

Tribalism was also a factor here, as confirmed by the fact that the families created some factions (such as the Braidī family) that formed the backbone of an Islamic faction (Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade), that later became a militant jihadist organisation aligned with ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). The Brigade's political transition from 'moderate' to 'extremist' highlighted the dangers associated with providing external support to groups that were viewed as being amenable to western designs.⁵¹ This was further reiterated when anti-tank weapons that Saudi Arabia sent to 'moderate' forces in the south of Daraa Governorate ended up in the hands of Al-Nusra Front.⁵²

5. Moderation, Radicalisation and the Internationalisation of the Conflict

As the Syrian authorities lost control of a substantial part of the governorate, it resorted to indiscriminately bombing residential areas of Daraa City and other cities and towns, and by June 2013, 80 percent of the city was under opposition control. The political authorities' use of Chemical weapons provided the international countries with a justification for interfering (Macro level). The alleged use of chemical weapons appeared to cross a U.S 'red line,' and it indicated that it was considering military action. This prospect appeared more likely because the 'Friends of Syria' group had established a Joint Operations Room, (MOC) whose members included the US, Britain and France and regional allies such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UEA) that would help to conduct military operations in southern Syria (Daraa) and nearer to the capital, Damascus.⁵³ The factors elaborated all contributed to international involvement in civil wars, although in different ways, and it is considered that the international capabilities can be conceptualised as a precondition for involvement.⁵⁴ The 'Room' of (MOC) provided financial and logistical support to the free Syrian Army factions (FSA), and also arranged training courses, which were held in Jordan. In return for this generous assistance, the FSA opposition indicated it would establish a civil state, combat terrorism, coordinate with the 'Room MOC' and uphold the country's right to self-determination.⁵⁵

In response to the advance of the Syrian authorities and the stalling of the Geneva II negotiations, the 'MOC' began supplying the FSA with guided and Grad launcher missiles. The arming of the FSA was therefore a deliberate effort to force the political

⁵⁰'Daraa, which Syrians do not know', Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, (May 2018).

⁵¹'The martyrs of Yarmouk Brigade and the Yarmouk Army in Daraa, Syria, are similar in names only', Al-Quds Al-Arabi, (2 August 2017).

⁵²'Saudi Arabia supports the armed Syrian opposition in the South with anti-Tank Missiles', Al-Jazeera, (August 2013).

⁵³Syrian Foundation for Studies and Public Opinion Research, 'Daraa, a story of a revolution: from peacefulness to the current reality', Opinion Research, (February 2017).

⁵⁴S. Gent, 'Going in when it counts military intervention and the outcome of civil wars', International Studies Quarterly 52(4), (2008), pp. 713–735.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 733.

authorities into returning to the negotiating table. It initially appeared that this had been successful, as FSA forces played a decisive role in the battles in the countryside west of Qunaitra, and halted the advance of Nusra Front and ISIS-aligned forces in the Yarmouk Basin and border areas of the occupied Golan Heights.⁵⁶

Opposition force advances in the western, northern and southern countryside left them in control of around a third of the governorate and the Opposition then sought to consolidate these gains by unifying. Meanwhile, Southern Front factions and the Islamic Movement of Muthanna made an important strategic gain when they took the 'Tal Al-Hara' region, which is located between the north-western countryside of Daraa governorate and the eastern countryside of Qunaitra governorate. This removed key brigades (Advanced Chemistry, Electron, and Signal) under the command of the national authorities and enabled the opposition to seize the last and largest military reservoir in the western countryside. This meant that all roads between the Qunaitra governorate and Daraa's western countryside were opened, and this provided a clear strategic depth.⁵⁷ Control of this region also provided the Opposition with a confidence boost, and impetus to move forward and achieve victories such as the lifting of the siege of Al Sheikh Maskin town.⁵⁸

In late November 2014, ISIS was reported to have deployed forces to the 'Bir Qasab' area in north of As-Suwayda and Daraa governorates and Al-Nusra responded by sending large military reinforcements to the north-eastern border of the governorate's (Lajat area). Al-Nusra implicitly indicated a number of points, including its determination to eliminate all traces of Islamic State in Daraa, which would be a grave and unanticipated danger. Indeed, Al-Nusra's worst fears came to pass at the beginning of 2015 when the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, from its base in the Yarmouk Basin, recognised its ideological affinities with ISIS by pledging allegiance to it. This was perhaps not a surprise, as ideological affinities notwithstanding,⁵⁹ armed conflict had broken out between them in the preceding December, when the Brigade accused the Front of killing 'Ahmed Kassab Al-Masalma,' one of its leaders, and then responded by trying to assassinate a Brigade commander. Even more seriously, the Front had previously accused the Brigade of secretly pledging allegiance to ISIS.⁶⁰

The emergence and development of the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade was intended to prevent militants from expanding and filling the vacuum in the liberated areas. Meanwhile, other factions announced the need to unite and establish a joint command. In addition, this was why the first army (*Aljaysh Alawal*), which included the (Syria Revolutionaries Front, Hamzeh Division, and 1st Artillery Regiment), was formed at the beginning of January 2015 (namely to stand against this new ideologically extreme army).⁶¹ Other factions also responded by recognising the need to unite and establish a joint leadership, therefore, they formed the Southern Hawks coalition and

⁵⁶'Daraa from revolution to containment', Geiroun Centre, (July 2017).

⁵⁷'Two-thirds of Daraa is completely under opposition control', Al-Awsat Magazine, (November 2014).

⁵⁸Interviews with Members of Free Syrian Army worked in Daraa, 2021.

⁵⁹H. Hassan, 'The sectarianism of the Islamic state, beyond Sunni and Shia: the roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East', Oxford Scholarship Online, (2019), p. 45.

⁶⁰Interviews with Members of Free Syrian Army worked in Daraa, 2021.

⁶¹Syrian Foundation for Studies and Public Opinion Research, 'Daraa, a story of a revolution: from peacefulness to the current reality', Opinion Research, (February 2017).

the Hawran and Osood (Lions) al-Sunna Brigades on 15 May 2015.⁶² Here, as in other instances, the alliance reflected a range of influences, including field pressures, geographical location, ideological rapprochement and pragmatic calculations. These influences were however liable to shift in response to a number of factors, including personal relations and disputes.

This kind of unification enabled other Southern Front factions, and most notably the 'First Corps,' 'Jabhat al-Nusra' and the 'Islamic Muthanna Movement,' to continue liberating Daraa. The kind of resources that the political authorities need to possess to be able to influence the outcome of a civil war will depend on factors that include the kind of weapons and technologies being used by warring parties and the geography of the territory where the civil war is taking place. Military capabilities in particular are not an absolute value, but are related to specific situations.⁶³ On 23 January 2015, as part of the 'Enter the door' operation, Opposition brigades liberated the Syrian Brigade (82) adjacent to the city of Sheikh Maskin, which enabled control of the whole city. This was important for several reasons: first, the strength of the brigade armaments, which consisted of nine artillery bases, nine missile battalions, two technical battalions and a Type 6 air defence system. Second, the brigade had been essential to the mobilisation of Special Forces and militia (*Shabiha*) members. Third, in addition to securing a rear base for insurgents on the border strip of Sheikh Maskin, it also established a starting-point for the liberation of the towns of Izraa and Khirbet Ghazaleh.⁶⁴

At this stage, some of the FSA's leaders and members of the Free Army still viewed Al-Nusra in Daraa with respect and even as a mentor. However, this soon began to change once it became clear that the Front wanted to crush the rebels and FSA factions, including assassinating its prominent members, such as Ahmed Al-Nima, the commander of Daraa's Military Council. The Daraa moderate factions were suspicious of Al-Nusra because most of its leadership were non-nationals, and its interpretation of Islam diverged from local practice.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the local population increasingly rejected Al-Nusra's presence, and a large number of its fighters were forced to leave the governorate.⁶⁶

5. The role of Iran, Russia, and militias in preventing the collapse of the Syrian authorities

The unity and coherence of the Syrian military was due in large part to the fact that its members viewed themselves as being caught up in a struggle for their own survival.⁶⁷ Although the Syrian authorities had historically sought to exploit tensions for its own purposes in Daraa, this was only possible when state institutions and an

⁶²K. Khaddour, 'The Assad Regimes hold on the Syrian State', Carnegie Endowment, (July 2015).

⁶³Rand Corporation, *Measuring National Power in the Post-Industrial Age* (Washington, DC: Rand Corporation, 2000).

⁶⁴Interviews with Members of Free Syrian Army worked in Daraa, 2021.

⁶⁵The Islamic State Organization called ISIS: Morphology, Discourse and Practice (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2018), pp. 220–244.

⁶⁶Interviews with Daraa Refugees in Jordan and UK, 2021.

⁶⁷L. Derek, *Arab Uprisings and Armed Forces: Between Openness and Resistance* (Geneva: Ubiquity Press, 2011), p. 50

associated national identity constrained religious or social tensions. When this no longer applied, jihadist groups benefitted. In addition to deliberately stoking the flames of sectarianism for its own purposes, the Syrian authorities also threw further flames on the fire when, in drawing on the support of Iran and Hezbollah, it sent thousands of Shia fighters to the Daraa front. This was intended to support Russian air attacks and also ease the pressure on the beleaguered and undermanned Syrian armed forces.⁶⁸

The Syrian authorities suffered large losses in Daraa, and when insurgents established supply routes that ran from the southern borders to the Damascus countryside, the political authorities were forced to increasingly rely on Hezbollah, Iranian Revolutionary Guard fighters and Shia volunteers from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq.⁶⁹ Syrian armed forces and allied militia played an essential role in helping the political authorities to re-establish control over a strategic location ('Death Triangle') in the governorate's north-west.⁷⁰ It became increasingly clear that Iran was controlling Syria, and that the conflict was both regional and international. Iran-U.S. relations therefore became important, and so did the proximity of the conflict to Israel's borders. Both helped Iran to 'increase [its] negotiating cards.'⁷¹ In addition, Hezbollah's entry was strategic and was intended to open an active front with Israel in southern Syria and help to create a second 'front' that could be opened in any escalation. Hezbollah established itself in the town of Busra, where more than 20 percent of the population are Shia, and the political authorities established a large number of military checkpoints inside the town and turned the Busra Castle into a headquarters and military barracks. In late March 2015, Opposition factions launched a major offensive and expelled all Syrian forces and -allied Militia to As-Suwayda, where they were denied support and protection.⁷²

The Opposition tried to seize the town of Daraa on various occasions, but another macro level appeared after Russia entered the war in summer 2015, the situation, both in the governorate and Syria more generally, began to shift in favour of the Syrian authorities. A significant development came in by the end of December 2015, when the Syrian authorities regained control of the 82nd Brigade, which enabled it to open a front in Al Sheikh Maskin region and enter it. In subsequent engagements, air strikes provided direct support to militias on the ground, and this enabled the political authorities to re-establish control over the largest cities in the province and the transportation route between Damascus and Daraa. After supply lines were established between the cities of Al Sheikh Maskin and Ottoman, the political authorities controlled a quarter of the governorate's territory.⁷³

Conflicts with clear sectarian dimensions have become increasingly obvious. Actors on the ground took their lead from the political authorities,⁷⁴ and this confirmed the

⁶⁸E. Darek, 'Syria: why is Assad still in power?' Middle East Eye, (April 2015).

⁶⁹'The battle for Daraa: shifting the balance in Syria', Israel Defence, (December 2015).

⁷⁰Interviews with Members of Free Syrian Army worked in Daraa, 2021.

⁷¹'The battle of Al Qunaitra and Daraa', Israel Defence, (May 2015).

⁷²P. Smyth, 'The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its regional effects', the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (February 2015).

⁷³A. Bassiri, and T. Raffaello, 'Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict', RUSI Journal, (2016), p. 27.

⁷⁴'Southern Syria: a new front for Israel?' The Washington Institute, (March 2015).

extent to which sectarianism became a means of achieving mobilisation through conflict manipulation.⁷⁵ ISIS, Al-Nusra and other prohibited 'terrorist' groups were exempt from the ceasefire agreement of 27 February 2016. The political authorities also viewed the ceasefire as a way of achieving its strategic objectives of consolidating its defence lines around the capital and securing the Damascus-Amman Highway, an artery supply line. The FSA was however undermined by the ceasefire, along with its conflicts with ISIS-allied groups.⁷⁶

The war between the opposition and the political authorities intensified, and when the war encroached on Jordan's borders, international mediation established a ceasefire on 27 February 2016, which resulted in a stalemate in Daraa. The political authorities and Al-Nusra/Ahrar Al-Sham were no longer engaged in direct fighting, but the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, Muthanna, Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar Al-Sham sought to settle their scores.⁷⁷ Assassinations of leaders of Al-Nusra, Ahrar Al-Sham were blamed on ISIS-allied cells of the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, and members of the Al-Nusra Front pledged allegiance to the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, despite both the Front and Ahrar al-Sham taking issue with its extremism.⁷⁸ This was not merely a matter of settling scores, as it would enable the victors to gain control of the western countryside that connects the Syrian and Jordanian 'border' territories and leads onto the Golan Heights.⁷⁹ Each of the parties clearly calculated that in the wider context of stalemate, the benefits (including access to resources and political power) would outweigh the costs.

Amidst these numerous conflicts, there was also ideological rapprochement between Islamic groups that defined themselves in terms of the absence of external support. Accordingly, the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, Islamic Muthanna Movement and Jihad Army decided to form a single organisation that would henceforth operate as the 'Khalid ibn al-Walid Army'.⁸⁰ However, the basis of cooperation quickly evaporated when leaked information suggested that Al-Nusra would be targeted once the different factions were incorporated into a single army. Al-Nusra then, after making various calculations, decided to stop fighting the Al Yarmouk Brigade.⁸¹

6. The Syrian authorities retake Daraa

The Opposition launched an offensive on 12 February 2017 with the aim of removing the political authorities and their allies. Room and Jordan (MOC) in particular, called for the offensive to be halted, on the grounds that it could jeopardise the Geneva and Astana track negotiations, result in large-scale displacement. Jordan also had other motivations that it had also previously obtained revenues from the border crossing

⁷⁵M. Hele, 'Coming in from the cold: how we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites', *Pomeps*, (2015).

⁷⁶M. Herzog, 'The regime continues to violate the 'armistice' a massacre in 'Dael' in the countryside of Daraa', the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (2015).

⁷⁷Interviews with leaders of FSA in Jordan, 2021.

⁷⁸'Jaish Khalid Bin al-Walid between the local struggle and regional threat', Consultant Centre for Studies and Documentary, (2017).

⁷⁹L. Aboufadel, 'ISIS affiliate captures key town in Daraa', *AMN*, (2016).

⁸⁰H. Kaaman, 'Daesh in Daraa -the subsidies of Jaish Khalid Bin al-Walid', *Hugo Kaaman*, (2019).

⁸¹'What is Jaish Khalid bin-Walid', *Institute for Global Change*, (2017).

and could only do this again if the political authorities re-established their control over the border. It was also concerned that the 'Khalid ibn al-Walid' Army, which was viewed as being sympathetic towards ISIS, would potentially be in a position to exploit the confusion and move south towards its territory. In addition and in terms of security, this operation would engage more Iranian in the region and it would increase the political authorities' dependence on Iranian allies – this was especially the case near Jordan's borders, which would totally jeopardise Jordan security.⁸²

Jordan responded by training and supporting the 'Free Clans Army,' took other precautions to stop the 'Khalid ibn al-Walid' Army from advancing into its territory. Jordan's fear intensified as Iran aggressively intervened in the city, and advanced to the border crossing with Jordan with the aim of separating the eastern and western countryside of Daraa. Moreover, Iran sent a large number of multinational Shiite militia fighters to enter the battle, led by the Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran itself aimed to reach and control the crossings with Jordan, as it wanted to impose its control over the western Qalamoun adjacent to the Lebanese border. Iran considered this battle an opportunity to isolate the areas of Daraa and gradually control the most important symbolic strongholds remaining for the Free Army, and then approach the Golan Heights.⁸³

Intensive meetings between Jordanian, Russian and U.S. representatives in Amman then produced a de-escalation and cease-fire. A conference that was held alongside the G20 summit in Hamburg then agreed to permanently de-escalate the situation in southern Syria, keep Bashar Al-Assad in power and ensure that Iranian forces remained at least 40 km far from the Jordanian border.⁸⁴ The agreement did not last for long, as the U.S. and Russia apparently abandoned the 'de-escalation' agreement in these areas, and the Syrian authorities then focussed the various resources at their disposal, including elite Republican Guard units and Iranian Special Forces, on the governorate. With the help of Iranian militias, the political authorities' forces were able to advance rapidly in the eastern part of Daraa and gain control of 58 percent of the governorate's territory. But even as these advances occurred both Russia and the political authorities extended the possibility of reconciliation, which implicitly acknowledged that the Syrian political authorities lacked the ability and resources to re-establish control over Daraa.⁸⁵

The Opposition's efforts to unify proved to be futile, as the political authorities' quickly regained control of most of the western countryside. An agreement was established with the factions that would enable the political authorities to re-enter the city of Daraa after an absence of seven years. On 12 July 2018, the political authorities raised their flag in the public square in front of the post office building, and celebrated the fact that they controlled almost all of Daraa governorate.⁸⁶ At the end of

⁸²AL Yarmouk Basin: a progress for the free army after clashes with Jaish Khalid Bin al-Walid, Russian Today Channel, (2017).

⁸³Interviews with Leaders of Opposition in south of Turkey, 2021.

⁸⁴The US-Russian agreement for southern Syria: protecting the borders of Israel and Jordan', Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, (2020).

⁸⁵Interviews with Daraa oppositions Leaders, January 2021.

⁸⁶A. Al-Jabassini, 'From rebel rule to a post-capitulation era in Daraa southern Syria: the impacts and outcomes of rebel behaviour during negotiations', SSRN, (2019).

July, Russian air support enabled it to enter the Yarmouk Basin Area and seize the remainder – the 15 percent of land previously controlled by ‘Khalid ibn al-Walid’ Army.⁸⁷

As the political authorities entered Daraa, there was a mass outflow of residents and in particular the young, to Lebanon, Turkey and the west. There were various reasons for this, including the security situation, the impunity of the political authorities, the absence of security, a declining economy, a lack of basic resources (such as bread and fuel), reduced agricultural output as a result of environmental factors and a general sense of hopelessness. However, the fear of conscription was the most important, and so the political authorities reassured young people that service would be limited to the southern region and would count as regular service. After this, hundreds of young people registered to serve in Military Security and Air Force Intelligence.⁸⁸

The political authorities also applied the ‘stick,’ in the form of legal cases that claimed that Daraa residents were activists or had previously fought against them. The State ‘Terrorism’ court also indicted individuals who it accused of previous membership of ISIS or collaboration with Israel. The political authorities also made it clear that they would not recognise certificates or qualifications issued by Opposition institutions, such as the Syrian Interim Government or Syrian Coalition. Meanwhile, Iran and Hezbollah initiated what appeared to be a sectarian displacement policy in the south of the country.

7. Conclusion

This paper on Daraa’s war and its violence has tended to focus on two poles, the local level (the micro approach) and the international level (the macro approach), and it has generally considered the connections between them. Previous analyses of the conflict therefore tended to ‘scale up’ their analysis of the conflict and this reached its logical conclusion in the latter stages of the conflict when it became widely perceived as a proxy conflict that was primarily of interest because of its implications for regional security. To this extent this was an acknowledgement of objective changes in the character of the conflict, but at the same time it also reflected a conceptual and theoretical predisposition to emphasise external reference points at the expense of ‘internal’ or ‘local’ counterparts. It was on this basis that Daraa governorate was selected as a specific example, with the aim of contributing to a shift of perspective, in which the emphasis shifted towards the ‘local’ or ‘internal’ level of analysis. While, in effect, this was a ‘scaling down’ of analysis, it should be remembered that the ‘local’ was not analysed in isolation but was instead understood in relation to international reference points.

This local-international dimension, I propose, became crucial to understanding the development of the conflict in the governorate. This is shown for example in relations between ISIS and Al-Nusra, where the local-international tension played a key role in the internal development and constitution of both groups. However, it will also conceivably play a role in the political authorities’ re-establishment of control of the

⁸⁷ ‘The Yarmouk Basin after ISIS’, Rawabet Centre for Research and Strategic Studies, (2017).

⁸⁸ Interviews with Darra Families in Turkey, 2020.

governorate, as it is not conceivable that this will, or even can, be achieved purely by using force. The political authorities' flexible approach to conscription, for example, is an implicit acknowledgement of this. It is also essential to recognise that the political authorities do not just impose themselves on the society in Daraa governorate but also instead sustain themselves through various interlinkages and established relations. Clientelism and 'crony capitalism' exemplify this.

My intention is not just to identify different phases and 'moments' in the crisis, but also to identify continuities. In the account that I have presented, there was accordingly not an inexorable momentum towards externalisation, but rather a conditional and partial 'movement' in which local actors retained some degree of influence over events. To this extent, 'externalisation,' in precisely the same way as 'sectarianism' was invariably a concept that concealed as much as it revealed. The concept of an 'altered trajectory' should therefore be approached and conceived with some caution. For example, while the resistance to the political authorities increasingly became militarised, some forms of non-violence resistance continued to occur. Similarly, while the nature of 'local' involvement in the resistance quite clearly changed, this participation did continue, but in a different form.

In conclusion, this paper should not be viewed as a contribution to an established literature. Rather, it is intended to contribute to a shift of emphasis, in which the premise of externalisation is problematised. In doing so, it suggests that the conflict can be better understood by engaging with its internal regional dimensions, and it cites Daraa governorate as a case-in-point. In critiquing macro-level and scaled-up analyses, it proposes the conflict can be better understood by focussing upon specific internal contexts and assessing local-international interactions. Crucially, this shifts the emphasis away from the question of intervention and instead presents both conflict and conflict intervention as negotiated processes. In broad terms, we can perhaps accept the proposition that Daraa governorate initially gained international attention as the birthplace of the Syrian uprising and then suffered the indignity of becoming a pawn in a wider geopolitical struggle. However, in registering this, we should perhaps understand it as the starting-point rather than culmination of our analysis.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).