



# Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria

Middle East Report N°187 | 21 June 2018

Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

[brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction .....	1
II. The South-western De-escalation .....	3
A. The International De-escalation Arrangement .....	3
B. De-escalation, Locally .....	8
1. A Tenuous Ceasefire and the Southern Front .....	9
2. Respite for Southern Civilians .....	12
3. Cross-line Links .....	13
III. The Israel Factor.....	16
IV. At Decision Point .....	19
A. The Syrian Army Heading South .....	19
B. The International Dimension .....	21
V. Toward a Soft Landing .....	25
A. An Interim Step: “Stabilisation” .....	26
B. A Negotiated Deal for the South West.....	27
VI. Conclusion .....	31
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Syria.....	32
B. About the International Crisis Group .....	33
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015....	34
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees .....	36

# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Having retaken the last rebel-held areas in Syria's western interior, the Syrian regime is turning southward. Regime forces are massing in preparation for a reconquest of the "de-escalation" zone in Syria's south west, which is protected by a trilateral agreement between Russia, the United States and Jordan.

**Why does it matter?** The south west sits at the intersection of Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan. A regime offensive to reconquer it could take a terrible civilian toll, destabilise Jordan, and trigger a wider conflict between Israel and Iran, especially if the regime seeks the help of Iran-backed militias.

**What should be done?** All sides should seize the opportunity to negotiate a deal for the conditional return of the Syrian state to the south west and avert a military conclusion that, for all sides and the local population, would be a worse outcome.

## *Executive Summary*

The ceasefire agreement that has protected south-western Syria for nearly a year is in danger of collapse. Syrian military forces are massing on the edges of opposition-held areas in south-western Daraa and Quneitra governorates in preparation for an offensive to retake them. The south west has been covered since July 2017 by a “de-escalation” agreement negotiated by its three guarantors – the United States, Russia and Jordan. Yet the three states never agreed to develop the deal far beyond an initial ceasefire, leaving the zone’s future uncertain. Having retaken the last opposition enclaves in greater Damascus and outside Homs, Syrian regime forces are turning south. If the zone’s three guarantors hope to head off a military offensive, and the dangerous regional escalation that could result, they urgently need to negotiate a new deal to preserve and stabilise the de-escalation zone, followed by a broader settlement for the south.

The location of south-western Syria, wedged between Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, means that renewed military activity there would be particularly explosive. Israel has launched an increasingly destructive series of attacks upon Syrian territory in response to Iran’s military entrenchment in the country. Iran and Israel are struggling over the nature and duration of the former’s military presence and political influence in Syria, including over the proximity of Hizbollah and other Tehran-backed forces to the Golan. Meanwhile, Jordan fears renewed conflict in the south that would involve both Iran-backed groups and Sunni jihadists, and could send waves of refugees toward its border.

Syrian forces seem poised to retake the south west. But the regime’s ambition is tempered by the risk of triggering an Israeli response that could set off an escalation between Israel and Iran and, perhaps, threaten its own survival. Alert to the danger of losing its gains in Syria, Russia has stepped in to broker a preliminary agreement with Israel. If successful, it would permit the return of the Syrian state to the south unaccompanied by Iran-backed militias. For its part, the U.S. seems focused on pushing back against Iran; this objective could make it agreeable to an arrangement for the south west consistent with Russia’s plan, provided Israel and Jordan agree.

The latest flurry of diplomacy may avert an open battle for the south west. For the three parties to the de-escalation, as well as for Israel and the Syrian regime, the rough outlines of a deal are relatively clear, including the return of the Syrian state to the south west and a zone parallel to the Golan free of Iran-linked forces. But the parties have yet to flesh out the details of that deal, including the timing of the state’s return – or even what precisely that would entail. This latter point is important, because while international parties may reconcile themselves to the state’s restoration in the south west, many rebels and local residents will not. If the regime is to refrain from launching an assault, a negotiated deal has to be minimally satisfactory to Damascus and its allies. But the deal should also be maximally accommodating for Syrians in the opposition-held south, within the realm of the possible, to encourage local buy-in and discourage needless bloodshed.

In the absence of a negotiated deal, the alternative is a full-scale Syrian military offensive in the south west that would come at a terrible cost – to southerners first

and foremost, but also to Jordan, whose fragile stability could be endangered; to Israel, which could be caught in a region-spanning war; and to the regime and its Iranian and Russian allies, for whom an escalation could threaten Damascus's survival and their own substantial strategic investment in Syria. At least for now, there is still potential for a negotiated alternative, but only if all sides recognise the opportunity and seize it.

**Beirut/Amman/Brussels, 21 June 2018**

# Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria

## I. Introduction

---

Syria's south-western Daraa governorate is often called the "cradle" of the country's 2011 uprising. Early demonstrations in Daraa, protesting the Syrian security services' detention and abuse of local children who raised anti-government slogans, became a symbolic focal point for a protest movement that spread nationwide.<sup>1</sup> As that largely peaceful movement militarised, the Daraa governorate became a stronghold of the country's armed opposition. In 2014, south-western rebels joined to form the Southern Front, a Western- and Arab-backed coalition that challenged the Syrian regime on the doorstep of the capital Damascus.<sup>2</sup>

By 2018, Syria's war had clearly turned in the regime's favour.<sup>3</sup> With help from Russia and Iran, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad had rebounded militarily. Between February and May, it went on to overpower the last handful of opposition enclaves in regime-held territory around Damascus and Homs. Only three zones remain beyond regime control, all on the country's periphery: the north west, which is reinforced by Turkish ground troops and a set of backroom deals between Turkey, Russia and Iran; the north east, which is protected by forces from the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS); and the south west, which, with no foreign troops based there to shield it, looks increasingly vulnerable. As a southern rebel political officer said, "Syria is being divided into zones of [international] influence that are clear and obvious – with the exception of the south; that's the only place that isn't".<sup>4</sup>

The south west, including Daraa and al-Quneitra governorates, has been covered by a trilateral "de-escalation" agreement negotiated by the U.S., Russia and Jordan in July 2017, who are its guarantors. The de-escalation, at least in its initial stages, has involved a ceasefire and a buffer excluding foreign Iran-backed militias. The future of the south-western de-escalation zone is now in question, however. The Syrian regime has dispensed with opposition pockets elsewhere and made clear its intent to retake the entirety of the south.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°108, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°163, *New Approach in Southern Syria*, 2 September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> This report makes a distinction between Syria's "regime" and "state", where the "state" is the country's formal governing and service institutions, and the "regime" is the set of formal and informal structures – some outside or parallel to the formal state – that effectively exercise power nationally.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bashar al-Zouabi, Jaysh al-Thawra political bureau chief, Amman, 21 April 2018.

<sup>5</sup> President Bashar al-Assad said, "we've now headed south. We're giving space for the political process; if it doesn't succeed, there will be no choice but liberation by force". "President Assad in interview with al-Alam TV: The Syrian-Iranian relationship is strategic ... the stronger response to Israel is striking its terrorists in Syria" (Arabic), SANA, 13 June 2018.

Yet the south west's pivotal location – at the intersection of Jordan, the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Lebanon – means a Syrian military offensive on the region has stakes that transcend Syria's civil war and Syrians' life-or-death struggle on the ground. Israel has launched an increasingly destructive series of attacks upon Syrian territory in response to Iran's entrenchment, militarily, in Syria.<sup>6</sup> The two are duelling over the nature and duration of Iranian military presence and political influence in Syria, including over the proximity of Hizbollah and other Iran-backed forces to the Golan. A regime offensive could also send thousands of Syrians fleeing toward the Jordanian border, at a time when Jordan is already burdened by refugees and a struggling economy.<sup>7</sup>

The south-western de-escalation paused Syria's civil war in one corner of the country, but it was also meant to mitigate the danger of regional conflagration. Now, the trilateral agreement seems in jeopardy, as the Syrian military masses on the edge of the de-escalation zone. Yet that threat has also lent urgency to international diplomacy, as Israel and the de-escalation's three guarantors work toward a deal that might avert an open armed confrontation in the south west that could easily implicate Iran and Israel.

This report analyses the state of the de-escalation agreement covering Syria's south west. It is based primarily on research in Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, the U.S. and Russia, as well as interviews with Syrians inside the country and contacted remotely. After surveying the de-escalation and the possibility of military escalation, the report offers policy recommendations for using the existing trilateral de-escalation framework as a vehicle for new international deal-making and a negotiated resolution for the south.

---

<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°182, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria*, 7 February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> In June, protests against unpopular austerity measures backed by the International Monetary Fund prompted the resignation of Prime Minister Hani Mulki. Rana F. Sweis, "Jordan's prime minister quits as protesters demand an end to austerity", *The New York Times*, 4 June 2018; and Jillian Schwedler, "Jordan's austerity protests in context", Atlantic Council MENASource, 8 June 2018, at [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/jordan-s-austerity-protests-in-context](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/jordan-s-austerity-protests-in-context).

---

## II. The South-western De-escalation

---

De-escalation in Syria's south west has worked on two levels: the international, expressed in the undisclosed agreement negotiated among its three state guarantors; and the local, as it is experienced by Syrians on the ground, living under an increasingly tenuous ceasefire.

### A. *The International De-escalation Arrangement*

The south-western ceasefire, the first step toward the de-escalation agreement, was announced on 7 July 2017 by then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, following U.S. President Donald Trump's and Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting at the G20 summit held in Hamburg that day.<sup>8</sup> The ceasefire went into effect two days later. The ceasefire announcement came after months of negotiations among U.S., Russian and Jordanian diplomats, who subsequently continued to fill out the agreement's details. In August 2017, the U.S., Russia and Jordan agreed to establish the Amman Monitoring Centre in Jordan to jointly supervise the ceasefire.<sup>9</sup> And on 8 November, the three concluded a memorandum of principles formalising the deal's terms. The memorandum was jointly endorsed in another statement from Presidents Trump and Putin, meeting on the margins of the November 2017 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in Da Nang, Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> Neither the original trilateral de-escalation agreement nor the memorandum of principles has been made public.

The de-escalation silenced the Syrian war's southern front. The south west had already been mostly quiet since 2015, when Jordan struck a deal with Russia following the latter's military intervention that September in support of the Syrian regime.<sup>11</sup> That calm was interrupted in the lead-up to the de-escalation agreement, when fierce fighting raged for months in Daraa's provincial capital of the same name before ending in a stalemate.<sup>12</sup> At the time, this outcome was thought to demonstrate the im-

---

<sup>8</sup> "Press briefing on the president's meetings at the G20", The White House, 7 July 2017, at [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-presidents-meetings-g20-070717/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-presidents-meetings-g20-070717/); "Background Briefing on the Ceasefire in Syria", U.S. Department of State, 7 July 2017, [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/07/272433.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/07/272433.htm).

<sup>9</sup> "Monitoring centre for southern Syrian de-escalation zone starts activities in Amman", TASS, 23 August 2017.

<sup>10</sup> "Joint statement by the president of the United States and the president of the Russian Federation", U.S. Department of State, 11 November 2017, at [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/11/275459.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/11/275459.htm).

<sup>11</sup> "Jordan, Russia set up mechanism of military coordination concerning south Syria", *Jordan Times*, 24 October 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Rebels say they launched the months-long battle for Daraa city's al-Manshiya neighbourhood to pre-empt an anticipated Syrian regime advance from the city's regime-held al-Mahatta section toward the Daraa/al-Ramtha border crossing with Jordan. Waleed Khaled al-Noufal et al., "Daraa city rebels launch preemptive battle to hold onto Jordan border crossing", SYRIA:direct, 13 February 2017, at <https://syriadirect.org/news/daraa-city-rebels-launch-pre-emptive-battle-to-hold-onto-jordan-border-crossing/>. Another notable exception to the calm in the south had been the Syrian military's Russian-backed offensive to retake the town of al-Sheikh Miskin between December 2015 and January 2016. The town's capture helped secure the highway linking Daraa city with Damascus.

possibility of military progress for either side and thus to provide another justification for de-escalation.<sup>13</sup>

The de-escalation froze the south west's front lines and established a buffer zone free of Iran-backed foreign fighters.<sup>14</sup> Along the edge of the de-escalation zone, the buffer is supposed to extend 5km from the line of contact between Syrian regime and opposition forces and 10km from the Jordanian border and the armistice line demarcating the Israeli-occupied Golan. The parties to the de-escalation discussed expanding the 5km buffer to 20km in subsequent Phase II negotiations, but never finalised the arrangement.<sup>15</sup> They also committed to the eventual expulsion of foreign jihadists from the de-escalation zone. Russia deployed military police as observers near the line of contact after the July 2017 ceasefire announcement, although it reportedly withdrew those military police from some points in April. Hizbollah and other Iranian-linked forces seem not to have completely withdrawn from the buffer zone.<sup>16</sup>

The de-escalation's three guarantors aimed to stop the violence in a corner of Syria that was both extremely sensitive geopolitically and, relative to the rest of the country, "more manageable".<sup>17</sup> The south west was already mostly dormant militarily, and Jordan had managed to minimise the influence of unruly jihadists by exerting tight control over its border and, with its allies' help, nearly monopolising control of material support to the southern insurgency. The agreement's guarantors said that by enforcing relative calm, they hoped to open space for political progress in Syria and prevent renewed conflict that could destabilise the region. For the U.S. and Russia, the agreement was also a showcase for possible productive cooperation, if not intentionally, then as a salutary by-product.<sup>18</sup> Washington's political investment in the south-western de-escalation zone came as it was paring down its involvement elsewhere in Syria. This contrast highlighted not just the south west's uniquely favourable conditions, but also its relation to the security of important U.S. allies. The interests of Jordan and Israel – the latter of which did not participate directly in negotiations – were key to the thinking behind the de-escalation.<sup>19</sup>

For Israel, that meant keeping Iran-backed armed groups fighting in support of the Syrian regime at safe distance from its border. For Jordan, it meant avoiding

---

Erika Solomon and John Reed, "Russia helps shift balance against rebels in southern Syria", *Financial Times*, 7 January 2016.

<sup>13</sup> "Background Briefing on the Ceasefire in Syria", U.S. Department of State, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> "Joint statement by the president of the United States and the president of the Russian Federation", U.S. Department of State, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, March 2018.

<sup>16</sup> An Israeli defence official said most had left and "only a handful" remained. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, March 2018. A Hizbollah official denied that a buffer exists and rejected the notion that the group was obliged to withdraw its forces. Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, October 2017.

<sup>17</sup> "Background Briefing on the Ceasefire in Syria", U.S. Department of State, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> "We negotiated a ceasefire in parts of Syria which will save lives", Trump tweeted. "Now it is time to move forward in working constructively with Russia!" Tweet by President Donald J. Trump, 9 July 2017, at <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/884013689736769536?s=12>.

<sup>19</sup> Israel was kept apprised of the trilateral negotiations, all three parties to which have a robust bilateral relationship with Israel. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°182, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.

new refugee flows and, if the situation could be sufficiently normalised, reopening cross-border trade and encouraging refugee return from Jordan. Jordan was also keen to minimise the presence of both Iranian-linked “sectarian militias” and Sunni jihadists on its border.<sup>20</sup> An Arab diplomat said:

There’s one threat [to Jordan], with several consequences: it’s that all hell breaks loose in the south and leads to an influx of refugees, radical groups playing a larger role and sectarian militias coming to the south. Such a scenario means all these things come together. It’s not like, refugees first, Hizbollah second. It’s all in one horrible package.<sup>21</sup>

The de-escalation was intended to protect both Israel and Jordan, even as the former complained publicly that the agreement did not go far enough.<sup>22</sup>

As part of their own trilateral negotiations in Kazakhstan’s capital Astana, Russia, Iran and Turkey had previously announced four de-escalation zones in western Syria, including the north-western Idlib governorate, the northern Homs countryside, Damascus’s Eastern Ghouta suburbs and the south west. The south-western de-escalation agreement was negotiated outside the Astana framework, however, without the participation of either Turkey or Iran.<sup>23</sup>

The Amman Monitoring Centre, comprising the three guarantors’ diplomatic and military representatives, continues to meet regularly in the Jordanian capital. Monitoring Centre participants keep track of flare-ups and ceasefire violations by the warring sides, which their respective backers are committed to suppress.<sup>24</sup> Bilateral talks have also continued, sometimes intermittently, between all three parties to the de-escalation.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Southern Syria and northern Jordan are linked by extensive familial ties, a fact that makes large-scale violence and displacement across the border in Syria a matter of domestic importance for Jordan and adds pressure on the Jordanian government to let in large numbers of refugees if Syria’s south turns violent. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018. A humanitarian worker estimated the number of displaced from a Syrian military offensive at between 50,000 and 80,000 people, or 100,000 at the highest end, although most humanitarian workers interviewed by Crisis Group thought Jordan was unlikely to open its border, and that displaced people would instead flee internally. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018. Even if Jordan kept its border closed, a refugee surge could strain its border security and agitate residents of northern Jordan with kin in south-western Syria.

<sup>22</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°182, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> “Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 6 May 2017, at [www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041). The Astana trio announced all four zones, and it managed the three zones outside the south west through the Astana framework. Russia views the south-western de-escalation zone as integral to the May 2017 Astana memorandum, whereas the U.S. considers it separate from Astana. The U.S. rejected the role of Astana guarantors Turkey and (in particular) Iran in the south. Crisis Group Report, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.; “Background Briefing on the Ceasefire in Syria”, U.S. Department of State, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Arab and Western diplomats, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Trilateral talks last convened in November 2017. Crisis Group interviews, Arab and Western diplomats, Amman and remotely via messaging app, April and May 2018.

Higher-level trilateral talks have faltered, however. These are the forum where discussion of substantive development of the de-escalation agreement, such as the Phase II expansion of the buffer and the opening of the Nasib-Jaber border crossing between Syria and Jordan to commercial traffic, should take place.<sup>26</sup>

Jordanian security met with southern rebel representatives in September 2017 for talks on securing the 18km road through opposition-held territory from Nasib to Daraa city and on opening the crossing itself under Syrian government auspices. Russia was involved in discussions with its fellow guarantors on an arrangement that would be acceptable to the Syrian leadership.<sup>27</sup> Talks between Jordan and southern rebels were initially contentious and inconclusive.<sup>28</sup> Then Washington weighed in against a Nasib deal and, in December 2017, conclusively rejected a reopening of Nasib that would have helped to reintegrate Syria in the surrounding region economically and politically. A U.S. official said:

We don't want the regime controlling Nasib. We're open to the idea of opening Nasib, so long as the regime isn't collecting revenues from it, and customs on the Syrian side are put in a transparent finance mechanism that goes back into local governance.<sup>29</sup>

That rejection fit into a revised Syria strategy on which Washington appeared to settle, at least temporarily, in late 2017 and that was articulated publicly by Secretary Tillerson in January 2018.<sup>30</sup> It was premised on combining various pieces of U.S. leverage to compel a negotiated political resolution to the war that would entail President Assad's departure. To that end, Washington planned to deny political

---

<sup>26</sup> UN aid agencies delivering humanitarian aid from Jordan rely on the Daraa/al-Ramtha crossing, the use of which is authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (14 July 2014), as do the UN's NGO partners. Nasib is also used on a limited basis to deliver humanitarian aid, as well as stabilisation assistance. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and humanitarian workers, Amman and remotely via messaging apps, April-June 2018. Jordan's economy has suffered as war and political strife have broken many of its overland trade links. The resumption of international trade with Lebanon, Turkey and Europe through Syria (via Nasib) could help a weak Jordanian economy recover. Jordan could also benefit from Syria's reconstruction, either through the participation of Jordanian companies and investors or by serving as a platform for reconstruction in southern Syria. For an example of Jordanian interest, see Islam al-Omari, "Jordanian economic delegation visits Damascus middle of this month" (Arabic), *Al-Dustour*, 5 April 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Russian officials represented Syrian interests in discussions on Nasib. The Syrian regime was not directly involved in negotiations over Nasib and presented no official proposal for reassuming control of the crossing. Crisis Group interviews, Arab and Western diplomats, April and May 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Southern rebels resisted surrendering control of the crossing, which would have been a symbolic blow and one, they told Crisis Group, with unclear implications for their ability to move to and from Jordan. Asmat al-Absi heads Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala (formerly Dar al-Adel), the south's single, rebel-backed court, and participated in Nasib talks. He acknowledged the economic importance of opening the crossing but said he and others in the negotiations refused to hand over the crossing to the Syrian government. "There are lots of sides that lose from having the crossing closed, and they're all trying to make the revolutionaries shoulder this political loss". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Rex Tillerson, "Remarks on the way forward for the United States regarding Syria", U.S. Department of State, 17 January 2018, at [www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm).

recognition and economic resources to Damascus and to keep large sections of the country indefinitely beyond regime control, including through an open-ended U.S. military deployment in Syria's east. Russian officials sharply criticised this shift in U.S. policy, which they said amounted to seeking to partition Syria.<sup>31</sup>

The relationship between Washington and Moscow generally was already fraught, but on Syria it promptly deteriorated. With little to productively discuss regarding the south, high-level trilateral meetings stopped.<sup>32</sup> Besides Israel, there was a second silent partner to the de-escalation: the Syrian regime. Washington's new attitude, including its adamant rejection of opening Nasib, clearly went against the latter's interests. Damascus, intent on recovering all territory it has lost to rebels once it is able to do so, has viewed de-escalation nationwide as a set of interim arrangements. Instead, Washington now seemed determined to turn the south west into yet another tool of leverage against Damascus.

U.S. allies have struggled to keep pace with Washington's changing policy on Syria, including on the south west.<sup>33</sup> The Trump administration still has no confirmed assistant secretary for Near East affairs, deputy assistant secretary for the Levant, Syria envoy or ambassador to Jordan. President Trump's June 2017 decision to halt covert material support to armed opposition factions alarmed allies and, at the time, seemed likely to endanger the south-western de-escalation.<sup>34</sup> His subsequent decisions to abruptly freeze U.S. "stabilisation" assistance across Syria, including the north east, and to potentially withdraw U.S. military forces from that theatre, have left allies further confused and off balance.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, the Trump administration has taken an increasingly hard line against Iran, including for the Islamic Republic's role in Syria. That tough rhetoric has frequently been difficult to square with the administration's apparent steps to disengage from Syria, which would seem to play into Iran's hands.<sup>36</sup> A Syrian activist said, "this freaked out everyone. Not just Syrians, also America's partners – the UK, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia. You're just surrendering Syria to Iran. You're bullshitting about Iran, but then surrendering".<sup>37</sup> The State Department's 25 May statement warning the Syrian leadership against an offensive in the south west and promising

---

<sup>31</sup> "US trying to create 'quasi-state' on large part of Syria's land – Lavrov", *Russia Today*, 13 February 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, remote via messaging apps, May 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S.-allied diplomats, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Nationwide, the covert assistance program had a budget of nearly \$1 billion a year. Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, "Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut", *Washington Post*, 12 June 2015; Greg Jaffe and Adam Entous, "Trump ends covert CIA program to arm anti-Assad rebels in Syria, a move sought by Moscow", *Washington Post*, 19 July 2017; and Sam Heller, "Saving America's Syrian ceasefire", The Century Foundation, 20 October 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Felicia Schwartz, "Trump freezes funds for Syrian recovery, signaling pullback", *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2018; Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump drops push for immediate withdrawal of troops from Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 April 2018. Stabilisation assistance is distinct from humanitarian aid and typically aims to build local capacity toward political ends.

<sup>36</sup> "After the deal: A new Iran strategy", U.S. Department of State, 21 May 2018, at [www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm).

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

“firm and appropriate measures” in response to regime violations, a warning reiterated in another statement on 15 June, have only added to the confusion.<sup>38</sup>

A key part of preserving the south-western de-escalation was more and better-coordinated stabilisation assistance in the wake of the agreement’s announcement, intended to restore semi-normal civilian life and supported by the U.S. and UK in particular. The U.S. contribution is now frozen, pending a review of Syria stabilisation assistance generally; a final determination is said to be forthcoming.<sup>39</sup> If Washington does not unfreeze stabilisation funds, the gap it leaves will likely be very difficult to fill, although other donors with their own commitments in the south west are unlikely to halt their existing support.<sup>40</sup>

The U.S. and the UK also took steps to establish a “border guard” force comprising units drawn from existing southern armed factions. This force is meant to receive training and salaries, thus partly filling the void left by the end of covert support for southern rebels. Its future is unclear, however, amid uncertainty over the U.S. contribution.<sup>41</sup> If the force gets off the ground, its contribution to stabilising the south west would mostly be to pay regular salaries to local rebels and ensure they have positive ties with donor governments. It is unlikely this force could make much difference in maintaining the de-escalation: outside actors will ultimately decide that arrangement’s fate.<sup>42</sup> By June 2018, with the Syrian regime apparently gearing up for a southern offensive, reports of intense negotiations between the de-escalation’s external guarantors suggest this decision point is drawing near.

## B. *De-escalation, Locally*

The de-escalation ceasefire in the south west has mostly held. Some skirmishes and shelling have persisted, but aerial bombing – an unambiguous violation of the de-escalation agreement – has been limited to only a few instances.

---

<sup>38</sup> “Assad regime intentions in the southwest de-escalation zone”, U.S. Department of State, 25 May 2018, at [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282540.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282540.htm). “Preserving the southwest de-escalation zone in Syria”, U.S. Department of State, 14 June 2018, at [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/283252.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/06/283252.htm).

<sup>39</sup> The U.S. has already decided to cut its stabilisation assistance to Syria’s north west, likely to be reprogrammed for a post-ISIS north east. Kylie Atwood, “Trump administration ends aid for northwestern Syria”, CBS News, 18 May 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Amman, April 2018. Separately, in April 2018, the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Office of Food for Peace halted the provision of flour to the south via the Flour Advisory Bureau (FAB). Apparently, it made the decision for unrelated budgetary reasons, but it seemingly did not communicate its rationale to local Syrians, who were alarmed. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, humanitarian workers and stabilisation implementers, Amman, and remote via messaging app, April 2018. For an example of the local reaction, see “FAB’s decision to stop providing Southern Syria with flour goes into effect ... those responsible look for alternative solutions” (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 11 April 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels and Western diplomats, April and May 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Rebel commanders who spoke to Crisis Group were nonplussed by the project. “A border guard is [something] for a stable country .... It has some benefit if it supports the border’s stability and controls smuggling. But it’s not a real project to guarantee the de-escalation zone”. Crisis Group interview, southern rebel commander, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

## 1. A Tenuous Ceasefire and the Southern Front

The Syrian military's January 2018 capture of the western Damascus suburb of Beit Jinn arguably has been the most significant violation of the deal so far.<sup>43</sup> Yet the Beit Jinn pocket was unusual for its geography and the mix of rebels in the town; its implications for the broader de-escalation therefore remain unclear.<sup>44</sup> In a more recent violation, Tal al-Hara in the western Daraa countryside was bombed from the air in May, likely by the Syrian air force.<sup>45</sup>

The de-escalation came close to breaking down in March, as the Syrian military overran opposition-held Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, and rebels in the south prepared a coordinated offensive to relieve the pressure on those suburbs. A rebel representative said, "if all the factions moved at once, that would have sent a message: the south has been sleeping for two years, but it will wake up. It would pressure the United States, and it would put the brakes on Russia and the regime. If we moved as one, they wouldn't be able to handle all these fronts".<sup>46</sup>

The Syrian military evidently was aware of the rebels' preparations.<sup>47</sup> In the lead-up to the expected battle, the Syrian air force bombed several areas in the eastern Daraa countryside, the first instance of aerial bombing since the start of the de-escalation and an apparent warning shot.<sup>48</sup> The U.S. and Jordan sent a set of coordinated messages to southern rebels discouraging an attack and saying they could not protect the south if rebels violated the ceasefire.<sup>49</sup> Enough major opposition factions

---

<sup>43</sup> The de-escalation's guarantors marked Beit Jinn as opposition-controlled and covered by the de-escalation, despite the presence of Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the latest iteration of former Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, in the town. When the Syrian military came to retake Beit Jinn, though, it did so with no evident consequences. Crisis Group interviews and interviews by a Crisis Group analyst in a previous capacity, Western diplomats, Amman, Beirut, Washington and remotely via messaging app, September 2017, March-May 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Rebels holding Beit Jinn were a mix of local nationalists and fighters from HTS, which is excluded from the de-escalation. And the town's geography made it uniquely unsustainable. Beit Jinn was non-contiguous with other rebel-held areas covered by the de-escalation and had been supplied by Israel across the Golan armistice line. It is separated from other opposition areas by the loyalist Druze town of Hader, the safety of which is a flashpoint in Israel's relationship with its own Druze citizens. For more on Hader and its residents' complicated relationship with Israel, see Crisis Group Report, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit. See also Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Reconciliation in Syria: The case of Beit Jinn", Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, 22 May 2018.

<sup>45</sup> "Aerial bombing, thought to be Russian, on Tal al-Hara in Daraa" (Arabic), SMART News Agency, 4 May 2018. Tit-for-tat violence in which blame is difficult to assign has also persisted, including periodic back-and-forth shelling in areas like Daraa city. For example, see "Al-Bunyan al-Marsous' warns the regime of escalation in Daraa" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 10 May 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ghazi Abbas, Alwiyat al-Furqan external representative, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>47</sup> "Thousands of civilians flee towns near Daraa's frontlines as rebels talk of 'preemptive strike' against government forces", SYRIA:direct, 12 March 2018, at <http://syriadirect.org/news/thousands-of-civilians-flee-towns-near-daraa%E2%80%99s-frontlines-as-rebels-talk-of-%E2%80%98preemptive-strike%E2%80%99-against-government-forces>.

<sup>48</sup> "Military [jets] bomb Daraa for first time in eight months" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 12 March 2018.

<sup>49</sup> The U.S. embassy in Amman's coordinated warning to southern rebels stated, in part: "As a state guarantor of the de-escalation, we do not want to see the regime take your land in the south. We want to preserve your right to demand a state of freedom and justice. So we ask you to take extreme care not to give the regime and its allies any opportunity to pounce on you, and to do in Daraa and al-Quneitra what it did in Eastern Ghouta. If you go ahead with a military action that violates the

heeded the advice and withdrew from the planned offensive to oblige the remaining factions to abort it.<sup>50</sup> A contingent of southern rebels, including Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra), have pushed for the opposition to resume the fight. They argue that “de-escalation” nationwide has been a means for the Syrian regime to concentrate its forces on one opposition-held pocket after another, eliminating each at its own pace, and that the south will soon follow. A Daraa city media activist close to those factions said:

There are a lot of commanders and thinkers in the south – chief among them are HTS’s commanders – who think the American government isn’t serious about supporting the revolution, and they’re right. They think this agreement has had an important role in revolutionaries’ letting each other down, as most of them depended on this agreement and have abandoned military action. This cleared the way for the regime to gather all its forces and focus on each liberated area, one after the other. So they’re working to take the initiative to attack, before the regime devotes itself to the south.<sup>51</sup>

Most rebel groups in the south see a new battle as suicidal, however, and are willing to abide by the de-escalation. A southern faction’s external representative said, “anyone rational is in favour of the truce. I tell the men: ‘You can take these easy positions, with these factions. But you can’t hold them, and you have no ammunition coming. And you’ll have brought down the truce as a card to play’”.<sup>52</sup>

Until early 2018, the more than fifty factions that made up the Southern Front coordinated with each other and their foreign backers in the Amman-based Military Operations Command (MOC) intelligence cell, including the U.S., Jordan, the UK, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Rebels formed ad hoc operations rooms for specific battles but never combined to form a supra-local structure or command.<sup>53</sup> With the end of covert military support and therefore the end of the MOC,

---

de-escalation, we will not be able to defend you. If the regime moves to violate the agreement, we will do everything in our ability to halt that violation and guarantee the continuation of the de-escalation agreement”. Muhammad al-Hamadi, “Houran’s factions, between a post-Ghouta scenario, ‘reconciliation’ flyers and Washington’s warnings” (Arabic), *Zaman al-Wasl*, 18 April 2018. Speaking to Crisis Group, a Russian diplomat singled out Jordan for credit for maintaining the de-escalation: “If the DEZ [de-escalation zone] [would have been] violated by the rebels, then we would have said: ‘Thank you very much; we are going after your men in the south’. But ultimately this did not happen .... The Jordanians do not want to give the Syrian army and others the pretext to move southward”. Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Moscow, May 2018. A southern rebel commander likewise said it was Jordan that had been most influential, not the U.S. Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>50</sup> A Daraa city media activist close to factions pushing for a resumption of military action said, “[the factions that withdrew from the battle in support of Ghouta] don’t have the capability to threaten [others]. But they coax you and lead you along until you depend on them; then, whoops, they pull out the stick after you’ve leaned on it. And then you fall on your head”. Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Alwiyat al-Furqan external representative Ghazi Abbas, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Rebels blame state backers who, they say, each supported their favoured factions and competed with each other for influence and control. Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels and former rebels,

southern rebels have no single command, although they continue to coordinate laterally to some extent. The MOC cut-off may have hurt rebel readiness, as many fighters have returned to civilian jobs in the last several months and report to their factions only a few days a week.<sup>54</sup>

In consequence, rebel backers' leverage over southern factions has diminished. Jordan maintains the most sway – it still controls border access and the delivery of non-military support – but its influence has declined as well.<sup>55</sup> Some independent funding channels exist, but nothing substantial or near comparable to the MOC. For its part, Israel has expanded its outreach to southern rebels (see below).

Unlike in the north west, jihadist groups are the minority among the opposition in the south. HTS is intermingled with other rebels and composed mostly of local southerners. It is not especially large or involved in civilian life. It lacks the strength to wage a battle singlehandedly, but it would likely play a leading role if conflict resumed.<sup>56</sup> Local Islamic State affiliate Jaysh Khalid bin al-Walid (hereafter, Jaysh Khalid) is based in Daraa's far south-western corner and periodically clashes with rebels in adjacent areas.<sup>57</sup> The group is mostly contained in the Yarmouk valley, whose geography renders it difficult to attack but also limits the threat the group poses to opposition-held areas and Syria's neighbours. It overran rival rebel positions around the town of al-Sheikh Saad on 19 April, briefly cutting the opposition-held western countryside in half before other rebel groups reversed its gains.<sup>58</sup> Non-jihadist rebels have proved unable or unwilling to eliminate either HTS or Jaysh Khalid.<sup>59</sup>

---

Amman, April 2018. For background on the MOC, see Crisis Group Report, *New Approach in Southern Syria*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels, remote via messaging app, April and May 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats and rebels, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Estimates of HTS's manpower in the south range from several hundred to a thousand fighters. The group's organisation and discipline likely give it outsize influence, however. The group typically fields suicide bombers and shock troops, who lead rebel offensives and rely on other rebels to follow. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, rebels and private stabilisation implementers, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Jaysh Khalid bin al-Walid, formed in May 2016, was a consolidation of local ISIS-linked jihadist factions Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk, Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiya and Jaysh al-Jihad. The group has not acknowledged its affiliation with ISIS, but it is broadly understood to be a local ISIS manifestation. It has hosted some ISIS cadres and evidently operates under some degree of ISIS oversight and direction. See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Islamic State ruling on Jaysh Khalid Fitna: Translation and analysis", Pundicity, 23 April 2018, at [www.aymennjawad.org/2018/04/islamic-state-ruling-on-jaysh-khalid-fitna](http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/04/islamic-state-ruling-on-jaysh-khalid-fitna).

<sup>58</sup> Jaysh Khalid seems to have been attempting to break through rebel lines to establish positions directly opposite regime forces. That would have allowed them to bus ISIS fighters and their families from Damascus's southern neighbourhoods, which were under attack by the Syrian military at the time, to the Yarmouk valley. ISIS's southern Damascus contingent was ultimately bussed to Syria's central desert as per the surrender agreement it reached with the Syrian military.

<sup>59</sup> Some rebels also continue to trade with Jaysh Khalid, even as they maintain a siege on its zone of control. See "Money in exchange for weapons ... factions and merchants complicit in smuggling weapons to the 'State' organisation in Daraa" (Arabic), *Nabaa*, 14 February 2018. At least some battles with Jaysh Khalid are waged for show, something that rebels decide in advance. Crisis Group interviews, Quneitra rebels, media activist and journalist, remote via messaging apps, May 2018.

## 2. Respite for Southern Civilians

For an exhausted local populace, the de-escalation has been a chance to return to a semblance of normal life. Residents of the opposition-held south covered by the de-escalation agreement have been able to live and work mostly without fear of aerial bombing or displacement, and donors have encouraged the development of local civilian institutions.<sup>60</sup> Jordan, the U.S. and the UK have made an effort to build up provincial-level governance bodies, including the Daraa provincial council based in the town of Nawa and a set of technical service directorates, alongside existing town-level councils.<sup>61</sup>

Numbers of war-wounded have declined to almost zero as military clashes have subsided.<sup>62</sup> Criminality and general insecurity persist, however, and residents complain of banditry, roadside IEDs, kidnapping, and drug use and trafficking. Local armed factions provide security, but some are themselves dangers to local civilians because of their involvement in crime or their rough treatment of civilians at checkpoints.<sup>63</sup> The south's dense network of familial and clan ties facilitates mediation

---

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian and stabilisation actors, Amman, April 2018. Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala head Asmat al-Absi said: "Over the past year, battles have come to a halt. There were projects to develop institutions, for reconstruction, to organise things". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>61</sup> The Jordanian government had previously discouraged donors from dealing with the Daraa provincial council, which it suspected of ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, but it has established a positive relationship with the council's leadership elected in March 2017, led by Ali al-Salkhadi. New council elections have been delayed by three months and will likely be held in June. The newly announced Houran Revolutionary Council is contesting the elections. Its rivals consider it Muslim Brotherhood-linked, as does the Jordanian government, which would likely find its leadership of the provincial council unacceptable. Crisis Group interviews, local governance actors, Western diplomats, humanitarian workers and stabilisation implementers, Amman, April 2018. "Here, everything with a beard is 'Brotherhood'", a Daraa city media activist complained sarcastically. "Really, I think outside observers of the revolutionary ranks suffer from colour blindness". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018. Governance in Quneitra is less developed – provincial council head Dirar al-Bashir is divisive – but it is small, and its governance bodies function partly as an extension of Daraa institutions. Crisis Group interviews, stabilisation implementers, Amman, April 2018; and Quneitra residents, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, Irbid, April 2018; Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, stabilisation implementers, Western diplomats, Amman, April 2018. A video of a kidnapped child that circulated in February 2018 was repeatedly cited by Crisis Group interviewees, who said it made a major impression on southern opinion, including among refugees in Jordan. "Child kidnapping case in Daraa and publication of video of his torture stir up public opinion" (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 27 February 2018. In all, however, a surge in crime that had been expected in early 2018 – after the cut-off of rebel salaries via the MOC – seems not to have materialised. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, stabilisation implementers, Western diplomats, Amman, April 2018. For warnings prior to the salary cut, see Heller, "Saving America's Syrian Ceasefire", op. cit. Western donors support local "community police", but their efficacy is limited by the fact that they are frequently some of the least well-armed actors in any community. The south's Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala court has its own judicial police but relies primarily on armed factions to enforce its writ. Crisis Group interviews, stabilisation implementers and Western diplomats, Amman, April 2018; Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala head Asmat al-Absi, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

and serves as a check on crime and violence, but the war has tested these social bonds.<sup>64</sup>

The first several months of the de-escalation witnessed a surge in refugee returns from Jordan to the south west.<sup>65</sup> These declined not long afterward, as returnees sent negative reports about local conditions to their relatives still in Jordan, and as southerners generally lost confidence in the de-escalation's future prospects.<sup>66</sup> Critically, for refugees the return to Syria's southern interior is a one-way trip, with no obvious way to leave again if conflict resumes. Jordan has maintained tight control over its Syrian border. It last allowed a major refugee intake from Syria in December 2014, and almost totally sealed the border to people seeking to leave Syria after a July 2016 attack by ISIS on a Jordanian military border post.<sup>67</sup> Aid and stabilisation assistance is trucked in via the al-Ramtha and Nasib crossings. Cross-line humanitarian deliveries from regime-held areas are infrequent, in part because of some opposition Syrians' resistance to what they consider the politicised, pro-regime role of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. Cross-line Links

By other measures, however, the south west is substantially more integrated into its regime-held surroundings than other rebel enclaves. These cross-line links have political as well as social and economic implications.

In part because of the impermeable Jordanian border, cross-line licit and illicit trade with regime-held areas has continued. Agricultural crops from rebel areas are sold in markets under regime control. Government provision of grid electricity and water has continued in rebel-held areas. Residents of opposition areas cross regularly to areas of regime control, where many of them work in public-sector jobs and collect state salaries.<sup>69</sup>

The Syrian regime never ceded the south west to the opposition, as a 2015 rebel advance in the north-western governorate of Idlib forced it to do there. The regime's

---

<sup>64</sup> Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala head Asmat al-Absi said: "The clan factor is present when you're in your own area. But when you're displaced, it's weakened. Say I'm a son of Sahm al-Jolan and I'm displaced to [the Quneitra town of] Saida. My clan is in Sahm al-Jolan, so I'm loose from this social or clan check. I might steal or do drugs. I might, God forbid, fall into crime. You have people who've lost both parents, or who've lost their eldest brother". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Mohammad Ghazal, "Around 8,000 Syrian refugees return home in 2017", *Jordan Times*, 7 February 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and Western diplomats, Amman, April 2018. Refugee returnees complained mainly about the security situation, but also about high rents, lack of work and unavailability of health care. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>67</sup> "Jordan: Syrians Blocked, Stranded in Desert", Human Rights Watch, 3 June 2015; Rana F. Sweis, "ISIS is said to claim responsibility for attack at Jordan-Syria border", *The New York Times*, 28 June 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018. Yadan Draji of the relief NGO Aurantis Life Line recounted one cross-line delivery to rebel-held Nawa by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) that was so huge it was understood as a political signal: "The message was that, 'if you deal with us, you'll get huge support'". Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>69</sup> See footnote 3 above for explanation of this report's distinction between "regime" and "state".

insistence on holding part of the provincial capital – where administrative and economic life continues, albeit with periodic bursts of conflict and violence – and the northward corridor to Damascus have ensured it remains palpably present in the south.

Damascus has used extant cross-line links to appeal to opposition communities to “reconcile”. “Reconciliation” is the regime’s euphemistic term for the mechanism by which it reabsorbs insurgent-held areas through lopsided negotiated surrenders. It entails the return of state institutions and services; the vetting of residents by the regime’s various security services (“resolving their status”) before formally granting amnesty; the conscription of military-age men into the regime’s army, auxiliary forces deployed either locally or elsewhere, or local police; and the bussing of fighters and civilians unwilling to subject themselves to Damascus’s control, or whom Damascus deems irreconcilable to territory beyond regime control, most often to jihadist-dominated Idlib or the Turkish-controlled eastern Aleppo countryside. “Reconciliation” has often followed extended sieges and involved the regime’s threat or application of military force, including extensive bombardment of civilian neighbourhoods and infrastructure.<sup>70</sup>

“Reconciliation” talks are rumoured to be taking place in front-line towns throughout the south. The regime has publicised meetings with representatives of a number of opposition-held southern towns, which have included representatives of Russia’s reconciliation centre based at Hmeimim air base in Latakia governorate. In those meetings, appeals for “reconciliation” have frequently been coupled with threats of attack.<sup>71</sup> Rebels contend that many of those speaking on behalf of opposition areas actually reside in places under regime control and have no local constituency.<sup>72</sup> At least some negotiators reside in areas of opposition control, however, and some have been threatened or killed for performing this role.

Historically, the south was considered a pillar of Syria’s Baathist system, producing prominent government officials, one of the largest contingents of Baath party command members by governorate and numerous public-sector employees.<sup>73</sup> That legacy remains. Many former municipal officials and *mukhtars* (mayors) who retain links to the state and Baath party remain in opposition-held areas, protected by clan

---

<sup>70</sup> For some of the most complete accountings of “reconciliation” agreements, see “Local Impact of Reconciliation Agreements: A Preliminary Assessment”, Humanitarian Access Team, 10 February 2017; “Reconciliation and Remobilization: The Reintegration of Armed Opposition Combatants in Post-reconciled Communities”, Humanitarian Access Team, May 2018. For a breakdown of prospects for “reconciliation” in towns across the south west, see “Offensive and Reconciliation in Southern Syria”, Humanitarian Access Team, June 2018.

<sup>71</sup> The centre is called the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic. For a widely publicised, provocative example of one of these meetings, see “Daraa Governorate – Local Administration” (Arabic), Facebook, 21 February 2018, at [www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1173760019421320&id=774496196014373](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1173760019421320&id=774496196014373). A Western diplomat said: “The regime plays on people’s fear with this low-level outreach. Even if there are no resources going to [a southern offensive] now, there’s a greater potential for sowing fear”. Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels and Daraa provincial council deputy head Imad al-Batin, Amman, and remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People’s Slow-motion Revolution*, op. cit.

ties and used by locals as proxies for dealing with the state by proxy, including to secure official documents. Southerners assume these holdovers are some of the regime's main local interlocutors, but others, among them leading rebels, are evidently dealing with Damascus as well.<sup>74</sup> Local opposition bodies have publicly condemned these talks, and numerous negotiators have been assassinated, presumably by local rebels.<sup>75</sup> But the deals being negotiated are less full "reconciliation" agreements, as popularly understood, than deals to "neutralise" these towns. "Neutralised" towns will be spared regime bombing and, if a regime offensive comes, left unmolested as neighbouring towns are subdued. Southerners and diplomats who spoke to Crisis Group expected these towns would subsequently be expected to "reconcile".<sup>76</sup> Were the towns to fall again under regime control, the current negotiators likely would become the new elites and intermediaries with the state.<sup>77</sup> Yadan Draji, managing director of the relief NGO Auranitis Life Line, said:

There are many who benefited before, and many who weren't convinced of the message of the opposition to start with, based on their original convictions .... They want their role back, and they've received promises from the regime that they'll have an important role. And there are simple things like electricity and water. After seven years, water, flour and electricity are still weapons used by the regime to control communities.

The regime and its allies may also have penetrated these areas by other means as well. Southern rebels claim to have detained Hizbollah infiltrators, including a rocket-launching cell in the town of Jasem.<sup>78</sup> Suspicion of infiltration by Syria's security services abounds, but its real scope is impossible to know.

---

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interviews, stabilisation implementer, Syrian journalist, humanitarian worker, Amman, April 2018. See also "Investigative report: Syrian regime intelligence exploits social ties and services to infiltrate Daraa and the northern Homs countryside" (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 29 March 2018. For an interview with a *mukhtar* who has engaged in these talks, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Reconciliation in Daraa: Interview with the mukhtar of al-Karak al-Sharqi", Pundicity, 27 May 2018, at [www.aymennjawad.org/2018/05/reconciliation-in-daraa-interview-with-the-mukhtar](http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/05/reconciliation-in-daraa-interview-with-the-mukhtar). In another prominent case, Quneitra rebels detained the leader of rebel faction Jabhat Ansar al-Islam, who subsequently confessed (likely under duress) to reaching a deal with military security to "neutralise" his town of Umm Batina and remain on as leader of a pro-regime auxiliary detachment. "'Grave' admissions from commander of 'Ansar al-Islam' after his detention by factions" (Arabic), *Orient Net*, 3 June 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018. For an example of public denunciation, see "Councils and factions of western Daraa countryside threaten 'godfathers of reconciliation'" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 31 March 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Syrian residents in Jordan, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>78</sup> "Jasem military council in Daraa arrests cell answering to Hizbollah" (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 14 April 2018; Jasem rebels subsequently released the videotaped confession of one of the cell's alleged members, possibly given under duress. Rebels also raided alleged Hizbollah cells in Quneitra. "Opposition pursues 'Hizbollah' cells in Quneitra" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 6 May 2018. Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala head Asmat al-Absi said, "we put a checkpoint in front of the court, and a week ago we set up one in Kafr Shams. In that week, we detained cells belonging to Hizbollah and Daesh [ISIS]. If it took us one week to get two cells, what if we had had that checkpoint there before?" Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

---

### III. The Israel Factor

---

Israel's interests in Syria focus on preventing a strategic Iranian military presence across the country, including Iranian construction of military infrastructure and cultivation of foreign militia forces. In Syria's south west specifically, Israel has sought to keep Iranian and Iranian-linked forces away from the Golan armistice line, preferably beyond the range of smaller rockets that are relatively easy to move and hide. Over the course of Syria's war, Israel has communicated an expanding set of "red lines" it views as key to its security.<sup>79</sup>

Israel has provided medical care for wounded Syrians and cross-border humanitarian aid since 2013, an initiative it systematised and made public as Operation Good Neighbour in 2016 in an effort to establish regular contacts with residents of areas bordering the Golan.<sup>80</sup> Yet Israel's involvement has not been purely humanitarian. According to sources inside southern Syria, Israel has also provided support to southern armed factions since either 2013 or 2014 in an apparent attempt to cultivate local partners and secure a buffer zone on its border.<sup>81</sup> The linchpin of this project has been Liwaa Fursan al-Jolan, based in the town of Jabatha al-Khashab near the 1974 armistice line.<sup>82</sup> Israel also had a longstanding relationship with Beit Jinn rebel commander Iyad Moro before the Syrian military captured Beit Jinn and he "reconciled" with the regime.<sup>83</sup>

Israel now provides support to at least five factions besides Fursan al-Jolan in Quneitra and western Daraa.<sup>84</sup> It may have established ties with other rebel factions across the south, including some cut loose from the Amman MOC; how many and where is unclear. The former head of the Syrian Media Organisation (the Southern Front's unofficial media arm) Ibrahim al-Jebawi said, "after the MOC halted its support, the FSA [Free Syrian Army] was hung out to dry. So the FSA had the option to either give up their arms and surrender to the regime, or deal with the blue devil [Israel] to preserve the land they had liberated".<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> The full suite of Israeli red lines includes: the delivery of qualitatively advanced weaponry to Hizbollah in Lebanon; the establishment of offensive infrastructure by Iran-backed units in Syria's south west; enemy fire into Israeli-controlled territory; threats to Syrian Druze villages; the establishment of an Iranian seaport or airport; permanent Iranian bases or a permanent presence for militias trained and commanded by Iran; and the establishment of high-precision missile factories, in either Lebanon or Syria. Crisis Group Report, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> Alex Fishman, "The Syria liaison unit", *Yediot Ahronot*, 29 May 2016; Neri Zilber, "Why Israel is giving Syrians free spaghetti (and health care)", *Politico*, 28 October 2017; Crisis Group Report, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> Rory Jones et al., "Israel gives secret aid to Syrian rebels", *Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Fursan al-Jolan (Golan Knights), headed by Mu'az al-Nassar (Abu Suheib), was initially small, numbering in the dozens. It has now grown to nearly 800 fighters as it has recruited locals and provided services, with Israeli support. In early 2018, Fursan al-Jolan formed a coalition with other local factions, amplifying its influence.

<sup>83</sup> Tamimi, "Reconciliation in Syria: The case of Beit Jann", op. cit.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Israel's deepening involvement with Syria's rebels", *War on the Rocks*, 14 February 2018. Since this article's publication, Israel has halted support for a seventh faction after the commander was assassinated. Crisis Group interviews, rebel and media activists, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

Israel provides salaries, civilian vehicles, light weaponry and cash to purchase locally available arms on the black market.<sup>86</sup> Both humanitarian aid and military assistance enter through three main gates, al-Maalaqa, Jabatha al-Khashab and Breiqa.<sup>87</sup> Southern rebels and activists say Israeli support to most factions is less extensive than MOC support.<sup>88</sup> Israel provides direct-fire support for rebels fighting ISIS affiliate Jaysh Khalid in the Yarmouk valley, including airstrikes, but only material support for factions further north along the Golan fence.<sup>89</sup>

Israeli civilian and military support has generated a measure of pro-Israel feeling, or at least grudging acknowledgement that Israel is a lesser evil, among southerners.<sup>90</sup> Bashar al-Zouabi, political bureau chief of Jaysh al-Thawra, said, “Israel isn’t a friend; it’s an enemy. But it doesn’t represent a danger to us. And it’s not the enemy that’s killing me today”.<sup>91</sup> Israeli assistance was and remains controversial, but popular acceptance of its role has gradually increased, especially as the opposition’s other supporters have fallen away.<sup>92</sup> Many residents of Quneitra and Daraa believe Israel shares their goals, or that it will protect them from a Syrian military offensive. A Fursan al-Jolan fighter said: “Our relationship with Israel is good and we prevented the approach of Hizbollah and also Iran. I swear to God, if Israel occupied [our] villages, it would be more merciful than if Assad did it. God willing, Israel will stand by us”.<sup>93</sup>

Israel’s support for the opposition enclave on its border has been in tension with its care not to endanger nearby loyalist Druze villages, and thus disturb its own Druze citizens. This contradiction previously came to the fore in northern Quneitra, where Israel had to repeatedly warn local rebels against attacking the loyalist Druze town of Hader.<sup>94</sup>

Israel is not invested in the cause of the Syrian opposition as such, or in an opposition project in the south.<sup>95</sup> It does, however, seek to keep Iran-backed militias at a safe distance from the Israeli-occupied Golan. A May 2018 rocket barrage on Israeli military installations in the Golan, which Israeli officials allege was launched by Iranian forces, made concrete Israelis’ fears about an Iranian presence in the south west.<sup>96</sup> Rebel control over most areas abutting the armistice line is one way to limit

---

<sup>86</sup> Light weapons include rifles and mortars, mostly of Eastern Bloc origin. Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels and media activists, remote via messaging app, 2017-2018.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local residents, remote via messaging app, 2016-2018.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels and media activists, remote via messaging app, November 2017 to May 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Quneitra rebels and media activists, remote via messaging app, November 2017 to May 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern Syrians, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, 21 April 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Tsurkov, “How Israel won over the Syrian people”, *Forward*, 19 April 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.

<sup>95</sup> A southern rebel commander said: “Israel is the side that’s the most serious about stopping this Iranian expansion in Syria. We feel more seriousness in the Israeli position. But Israel’s position hasn’t, until now, been classified as support for Syria’s revolution”. Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Judah Ari Gross, “Air force chief: Iranians fired 32 rockets at Golan on May 10”, *The Times of Israel*, 22 May 2018. The barrage came in response to an apparent Israeli rocket attack on Syrian

such attacks, and still Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's preferred way. Yet it is hardly the only way, and with a regime offensive seemingly imminent, arguably the least sustainable one. Nor does it achieve Israel's larger strategic objective: while Israel is particularly sensitive to any Iranian or Iranian-linked presence in the south west, it ultimately seeks to remove Iranian forces from the entirety of Syria.<sup>97</sup> If the status quo is no longer tenable, Israel may decide to disaggregate the Syrian regime and Iran in its strategic calculations, and deal with Iran separately.

---

regime forces stationed in Madinat Baath. Isabel Kershner, "Iran fires rockets into Golan Heights from Syria, Israelis say", *The New York Times*, 9 May 2018, reporting that the "rocket attack early Thursday [9 May] appeared to come in response to Israeli strikes on positions in southern Syria on Wednesday".

<sup>97</sup> Tovah Lazaroff, "'We'll hit Iran anywhere in Syria', Netanyahu says", *Jerusalem Post*, 30 May 2018.

---

## IV. At Decision Point

---

### A. *The Syrian Army Heading South*

Now that the few insurgent pockets in regime-held western Syria have been eliminated, the Syrian military seems prepared to push south. Assad has said Damascus has “two options” in dealing with the south west: “either reconciliation, or liberation by force”. For now, he said, it is pursuing negotiations.<sup>98</sup>

The Syrian military has already sent forces to southern fronts, including auxiliary units.<sup>99</sup> This new build-up was enough to prompt the U.S. State Department to state on 25 May that it was “concerned by reports of an impending Assad regime operation”.<sup>100</sup>

Militarily speaking, the opposition-held south west may not be an especially hard target, particularly if the regime can rely on Russian air support. Some rebels express confidence that without Russian involvement, they will be able to hold their ground against an assault by Syrian forces, or by Syrians and Iran-backed auxiliaries.<sup>101</sup> That may not be a safe assumption, though the battle would certainly be much harder and costlier for the regime. If Russia provided air support for a Syrian military offensive, however, there is little reason to expect rebels could resist for long.<sup>102</sup> A southern rebel commander said:

[Southern rebels] will defend their loved ones, with whatever means they have. If there’s any breach, they’ll resist and defend themselves, valiantly and until the last moment. But you know the scale of Russia’s support and Iran’s. With support of that size, it is very difficult to resist. Even if they can resist, this is against state [militaries].<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Assad said, “what was proposed after Ghouta was heading south. We were in front of two options, as was the case in all other areas in Syria: either reconciliation, or liberation by force. At that point, Russia proposed the possibility of giving a chance for settlements and reconciliations, as happened in these other areas, with the goal of the situation returning to what it was before 2011 – that is, the presence of the Syrian army in that area, which is a front-line area with the Zionist enemy, and of course the exit of the terrorists. That’s a proposal that suits us. So far, there are no effective results, for a simple reason: Israeli and American interference, as they pressured the terrorists in that area to prevent any settlement or peaceful solution from being reached”. “President Assad in interview with al-Alam TV”, op. cit.

<sup>99</sup> “Al-Quds Brigade/Fedayeen of the Syrian Arab Army” (Arabic), Facebook, 28 May 2018, at [www.facebook.com/LWQDS/photos/a.679805812100279.1073741828.679766655437528/1740481159366067/?type=3&theater](https://www.facebook.com/LWQDS/photos/a.679805812100279.1073741828.679766655437528/1740481159366067/?type=3&theater).

<sup>100</sup> U.S. State Department, “Assad regime intentions in the southwest de-escalation zone”, op. cit.

<sup>101</sup> Referring to prominent Syrian military commander Brig. Gen. Suhayl “the Tiger” al-Hassan, Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala head Asmat al-Absi said, “the regime can mass all the troops it wants. It can bring the ‘Tiger’, the ‘Monkey’ or whoever. So long as the Russians don’t intervene on its side, it won’t make a difference”. Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern rebels, diplomats and humanitarian workers, April and May 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018. Another possible scenario is that Damascus ventures a confrontation without Moscow’s prior approval, expecting Russia to take its side. A Western diplomat said, “the Russians don’t have all the cards in their hands. And if their ally goes against their wishes, they have to support him. They can’t allow him to suffer these losses,

Because of the salient of regime control that reaches from Damascus into the opposition-controlled south west, rebel territory is particularly vulnerable to being cut at a few key junctures into smaller, more vulnerable pockets. Any Syrian military offensive would likely first target Nasib, dividing the eastern and western countryside and disrupting cross-border supplies to the east from both the al-Ramtha and Nasib crossings.<sup>104</sup> The eastern countryside would then face intense military and humanitarian pressure.<sup>105</sup> After the example of Eastern Ghouta, both in terms of its swift collapse and the muted international reaction to the Syrian military's alleged chemical weapons use, the Syrian military may be able to force bloodless surrenders in many areas.<sup>106</sup> The Syrian air force has already increased the frequency of leaflet drops, particularly in the eastern countryside, calling on residents to "reconcile".<sup>107</sup> In areas where notables have brokered deals with the regime individually and without popular buy-in, those ready agreements could suddenly attract broad support when an attack comes.<sup>108</sup>

---

because, in any case, they're going to need to sustain him". Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018. The Syrian regime has been keen to highlight that its latest victories have reopened the country's most important infrastructure links, including much of the M5 highway, Syria's main north-south artery, extending from Damascus's north to Aleppo and south to the Jordanian border. Retaking the remaining strip of the M5 highway down to Nasib, and thus re-establishing sovereign control over the crossing and reintegrating with the broader region economically, would be the most plausible next step. See "Army General Command: Restoration of security and stability to 65 cities and villages in the northern Homs and southern Hama countrysides – video" (Arabic), SANA, 16 May 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and humanitarian workers, Amman, April 2018. Pressure on the eastern countryside would be intensified if, as some Crisis Group interviewees expected, the regime cuts off cross-line commercial movement and smuggling through Sweida before an offensive. The Syrian military might also cut the eastern countryside in half, separating the more populous southern sector from the northern al-Lajah badlands, which serves as a smuggling conduit between the south west and central desert. For a discussion of a battle plan along these lines, see Firas al-Shoufi, "Damascus headed south: The battle is ready... as are the negotiations" (Arabic), *Al-Akhbar*, 31 May 2018.

<sup>106</sup> A Russian diplomat told Crisis Group the experience of Eastern Ghouta could be used to spare further bloodshed. "Nobody expected [Ghouta] would fall so quickly. After that, they [the rebels] became very eager to evacuate and there was a kind of momentum – a feeling of discouragement and despair among rebels, as if Assad is gaining the upper hand – and all you as a rebel can do is just negotiate, more or less, an acceptable way out and reconcile. So this would mean that Assad can retake these areas faster and with less blood further down the line". Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2018.

<sup>107</sup> "Regime pamphlets don't leave the skies of Daraa: Join the 'reconciliation'" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 20 May 2018. The Syrian air force has also dropped leaflets on the western countryside, indicating the regime remains interested in the entirety of the south. Tweet by "Central War Media", 25 May 2018, at [https://twitter.com/C\\_Military1/status/999963825423208448](https://twitter.com/C_Military1/status/999963825423208448).

<sup>108</sup> More intransigent rebels might also be brought to heel by civilian residents. A Russian diplomat said, "when reconciliation happens, there is always a clause of full amnesty. If a village used to support some rebels and used to host them – which often happens – then when they see that the government forces are coming closer and closer and they understand the inevitability, they come to the rebels and say: 'Guys, go with the reconciliation'. And because amnesty was one of the principles of this policy, it works". Crisis Group interview, Moscow, April 2018.

If Israel can be kept at bay, the western countryside likewise would not appear to pose a major challenge: regime forces could advance through the west's thin middle to reach Jaysh Khalid lines, bisecting opposition territory and cutting off its southern sector from Quneitra. The military could then proceed to deal with these two western rebel enclaves individually and seize more territory in and around the Jaysh Khalid-held Yarmouk valley.

Even if Damascus's offensive is initially geographically limited, rebels may themselves broaden its scope by launching sympathetic attacks in defence of comrades attacked elsewhere along the southern front.

### B. *The International Dimension*

Rather than the military challenge of retaking the south west, what delays the Syrian leadership from forging ahead is the unparalleled regional and international sensitivity of the border area and, accordingly, the possible involvement of major external powers: Israel, whose red lines, if transgressed, might trigger a massive, destructive intervention; Russia, which remains mindful of Israeli and Jordanian concerns and worried that Syria may become the theatre for an Israeli-Iranian confrontation that would exact a dear cost from the regime's armed forces; and an unpredictable U.S., which oscillates between the urge to extract itself from the Syrian quagmire and the resolve to confront Iran.

The risk of Israeli intervention and a broader escalation between Iran and Israel stands out as the most consequential uncertainty inherent in a south-west offensive, whose destructive potential may give Damascus and its allies pause. Israel could strike Syrian, Iranian or Iran-backed forces across Syria if they approach the armistice line or entrench themselves in areas abutting it. Retaliation for such attacks would carry the risk of an open, and potentially open-ended, conflict between Israel and Iran's proxies and allies that could spill over into Lebanon and even lead to direct confrontation between Israel and Iran. Given some Israeli officials' rhetoric, testing their red lines could carry suicidal risk for the Syrian leadership.<sup>109</sup> Russia and Iran, meanwhile, have reasons to worry that Israel would seriously damage their Syrian ally, in whose survival they have invested substantially.

Russia is moving diplomatically to neutralise that escalatory threat. On 28 May, Israel's Channel 2 reported an emerging understanding between Israel and Russia by which Israel would acquiesce to the Syrian government's return to the south west in exchange for a Russian commitment to distance Iran and Hizbollah from the Golan armistice line and call for the exit of all foreign forces from Syria.<sup>110</sup> Israel would

---

<sup>109</sup> In an apparent attempt to establish deterrence directly with Damascus, Prime Minister Netanyahu told a think tank audience: "When they waged this horrific civil war, Israel did not intervene. We built a hospital. Now the war is nearly over, [Assad] invites Iran in? He is no longer immune. If he fires at us, we'll destroy his forces". "Netanyahu warns Assad: 'If he fires at us, we'll destroy his forces'", *Yediot Ahronot*, 7 June 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Dana Weiss, "Looking likely: Understandings between Israel and Russia regarding Iranian entrenchment in Syria" (Hebrew), Channel 2, 28 May 2018. The broad strokes of media reporting have been corroborated in Crisis Group interviews, Israeli foreign ministry official and Western officials, May 2018. An Israeli foreign ministry official said, "it probably won't succeed at first, but

also retain the freedom to strike Iranian-linked targets anywhere in Syria without Russian interference.

Israel's military establishment, led by the Israel Defense Forces' Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot, still prefers that the Syrian regime postpone its offensive, and that the south west's fate be resolved through eventual negotiations for a broader political solution in Syria. He has Netanyahu's support.<sup>111</sup> Yet the Israeli military badly needs to coordinate sooner with its Russian counterpart on the details of a possible Syrian military offensive, which Damascus may launch of its own accord in order to draw in Moscow. Israeli and Russian military officials have repeatedly exchanged visits recently, in what is reportedly an effort to deconflict a Syrian military operation to retake the south and negotiate guarantees that Iran-linked elements will be kept out of the area.<sup>112</sup> Israel's military action in Syria was already facilitated by its bilateral relationship with Russia and the two countries' deconfliction mechanism.<sup>113</sup> It had worked assiduously to cultivate ties with Moscow and to appeal to the Russians to safeguard Israeli interests, including in Syria's south west.<sup>114</sup> Now, buoyed by Washington's anti-Iran hawkishness and its own pact with Moscow, Israel seems prepared to challenge Iran's role in Syria nationwide. At the same time, it is preparing for different scenarios regarding the south west, including disengaging, against the Israeli leadership's own preferences, from the struggle between the Syrian regime and opposition for control of the area.

Damascus, Moscow and Tehran all appear to understand Israel's red lines, even if their willingness to respect them remains uncertain.<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, they seem to have taken steps to address some Israeli concerns and thus smooth the Syrian regime's return to the south west. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has made repeated statements about the need for foreign forces to exit the south west, in keeping with Russia's purported agreement with Israel.<sup>116</sup> In an apparent acknowledgement of Jordanian (and by extension, Israeli) sensitivities, Iran's ambassador to Amman told a Jordanian daily in May 2018 that Iran would not participate in a southern offensive.<sup>117</sup> The secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council has said Iran has no role in operations in the south and supports Russian efforts to restore Syrian

---

the general direction has been set. The Russians know how to work". Crisis Group interview, May 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Jerusalem, May 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Alex Fishman, "Israel and Russia: The joint committee" (Hebrew), *Yediot Ahronot*, 31 May 2018; Anna Ahronheim, "Head of Russia's military police in Israel to discuss Syria", *Jerusalem Post*, 16 June 2018.

<sup>113</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, op. cit.

<sup>114</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, "At Putin's parade, Netanyahu seeks understanding on Iran", *Wall Street Journal*, 9 May 2018. Crisis Group interview, senior Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, May 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Russian diplomat, Moscow, April 2018; Western diplomats, Beirut, May 2018.

<sup>116</sup> "Lavrov: Pullback of non-Syrian forces from border with Israel must be fast", TASS, 30 May 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Ambassador Mujtaba Ferdosipour said Iran hoped to see a Syrian border controlled by the Syrian and Jordanian militaries, and that "Iran will not have any role or participation [in a Syrian military offensive in the south], if it happens, just as we had no role in the operation in Ghouta, Douma or Damascus". "Iranian ambassador stresses to *al-Ghad* that Jordan's security is part of his country's security", *Al-Ghad*, 23 May 2018.

military control of Syria's southern border.<sup>118</sup> Iran may look like the loser in the reported international agreement on the south, but it may also be protecting its long-term presence in the rest of Syria. Even as Iranian officials deny Iran would participate in a future southern offensive, they plainly reject the idea of a total Iranian withdrawal from Syria and have emphasised that their presence in Syria is at the government's invitation and therefore legal.<sup>119</sup> If Iran agrees to keep its distance from a Syrian offensive on the south west, there is no guarantee it will stay away indefinitely.

Russian-Israeli coordination that ensures Israel will not oppose a southern offensive would appear to remove much of the uncertainty concerning Israel's response, and with it a main motivation for Russia to discourage Damascus from moving south or withhold its own air support for the operation.<sup>120</sup> Still, this emerging understanding seems incomplete and will therefore require additional negotiation on details. There are other international complications to be addressed as well, specifically the U.S. position. The prospect of drawing the U.S., Israel and Jordan into an overarching political agreement on the south may be grounds for Moscow and Damascus to delay an offensive.<sup>121</sup>

U.S. and regional acceptance of a deal that restores the state's writ over the south west would further Russia's political vision for Syria considerably. It may prove insufficient for Damascus, however. Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem has demanded that the U.S. abandon its base at al-Tanf in Syria's eastern desert before it will consider any deal for the south west.<sup>122</sup> From Moscow's perspective, though, the prospect of a diplomatic victory may well be worth postponing a battle, whose success seems nearly assured either way.

The U.S. posture vis-à-vis the south west has been as unpredictable as the administration's position on Syria generally over the past months. While the U.S. may have scuttled the MOC and frozen stabilisation assistance, it has remained rhetorically committed to the de-escalation; the State Department's 25 May and 15 June statements suggest that the U.S. government would object to a Syrian military push into

---

<sup>118</sup> "Shamkhani: Military intervention by America and some regional countries in Syria is illegal and hostile" (Arabic), *Al-Mayadeen*, 2 June 2018.

<sup>119</sup> For example, see "General denies report of Iran's pullout from Syria", Tasnim News Agency, 3 June 2018. Assad has said the larger Syrian-Iranian relationship is not for sale: "So let me be clear: the Syrian-Iranian relationship is strategic. It's not subject to a settlement in the south or to a settlement in the north. This relationship, in its content and its results on the ground, is linked with the present and future of the region. And therefore it's not subject to the prices of the international bazaar. Neither Syria nor Iran has put up this relationship in the international political bazaar for bargaining". "President Assad in interview with al-Alam TV", op. cit.

<sup>120</sup> According to Alex Fishman's 31 May report in *Yediot Ahronot*, Russian and Israeli officials are drawing up maps and discussing the loyalist units to be excluded from any operation. Fishman, "Israel and Russia: The joint committee", op. cit.

<sup>121</sup> Assad said, "contact is still ongoing between the Russians, the Americans and the Israelis. As for the terrorists, no one is in contact with them. They're implementers. They'll implement what their masters decide, in the end". "President Assad in interview with al-Alam TV", op. cit.

<sup>122</sup> "Al-Muallem: Syria is a sovereign country, will cooperate with whom it wishes in combating terrorism ... we will liberate our land from terrorism and from foreign presence" (Arabic), SANA, 2 June 2018.

the south west.<sup>123</sup> Yet Washington has also signalled some flexibility. In May, the Trump administration debated a set of proposals that provide for the Syrian government's negotiated, organised return to the south west in exchange for guarantees on denying Iran-backed groups access to the area.<sup>124</sup> While such an approach would not match Israel's first preference, Tel Aviv's talks with Moscow indicate some receptivity to it as a tolerable alternative. That sort of approach would also catch up with Jordan's longstanding preference for the Syrian state's return to the south west.

As of mid-June, the U.S. government has signalled to its allies that it will not stand in the way of a deal for the south west – a break with standing U.S. policy, as announced by Secretary Tillerson in January 2018. At the same time, however, it has scaled back its own active participation in negotiations.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> "Assad regime intentions in the southwest de-escalation zone", U.S. State Department, op. cit. O'Brien, "U.S. vows to 'take firm, appropriate measures' against Syria violations", op. cit.

<sup>124</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi, "Initiatives and warnings for the sake of compliance with Syria's 'southern truce' ... and to distance Iran" (Arabic), *Asharq al-Awsat*, 27 May 2018. Confirmed in part by Crisis Group interviews, European official, U.S. officials, Israeli defence official, May-June 2018.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, June 2018.

---

## V. Toward a Soft Landing

---

There is still time and political space for a negotiated resolution in the south west that would avert a destructive and risky military offensive. Conditions could be propitious: Russia has evinced sensitivity to Israeli and Jordanian interests and a desire to draw the U.S. into a political arrangement that serves Russian aims in Syria; Israel has threatened military action if Iranian-linked elements approach the Golan, action that could threaten the Syrian regime and overturn some of Damascus's and Moscow's military gains since Russia's September 2015 military intervention; and there remains the possibility (however slim) of U.S. military intervention in response to a regime offensive, at least judging from the State Department's 25 May and 15 June statements.

With no deal, a full-scale, Russian-backed Syrian military offensive remains the presumed default and, for all sides, a worse outcome.

An offensive would be most disastrous for the south west's residents. The proportion of rebels who will choose to fight – and probably lose – will be higher if their state backers cannot negotiate improved terms for a settlement and push them to peaceably take the deal. More civilians will die in the crossfire. Local surrenders will look more like what some have termed “hard reconciliations”, imposed by raw force and with minimum negotiated guarantees.<sup>126</sup> These defeats have been some of the worst, most scarring losses dealt to opposition areas retaken by the regime. They have come at a much greater human cost and with much larger sections of these communities amputated and removed to Idlib or Turkish-held parts of Aleppo.

Aside from southerners themselves, the opposition's backers have the most to lose. Israel risks squandering whatever lasting, systematic guarantees about Iran's presence and role it might have been able to negotiate in advance, however uncertain or underwhelming it might consider them.<sup>127</sup> Jordan is particularly vulnerable to destabilising refugee flows that would result from a Syrian military offensive in the south.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, looking beyond an interim de-escalation, Jordan's economic health requires regular political and trade ties with Syria. Jordanian and Israeli interests – and by association U.S. interests – would be best served by a peaceable and orderly transition in the south west, not a gruesome military confrontation that could allow jihadists to return to the fore, encourage the Syrian regime to rely on Iranian-linked militia auxiliaries, bring Israel into the conflict and draw in the U.S. as well.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>126</sup> “Reconciliation and Remobilization”, Humanitarian Access Team, op. cit.

<sup>127</sup> An Israel defence official said, “a wiser Israeli strategy would have been encouraging the groups we support to go for reconciliation and in exchange securing Russian guarantees regarding the Iranian presence in the south west. But I don't see us coming to our senses on this before it is too late. By the time the Russians are near Quneitra, Moscow won't be willing to give a dime in exchange for our help”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2018.

<sup>128</sup> A Western diplomat said, “some, including in the Jordanian system, say it would be best for Jordan to have the regime back on its border. But how do you get from A to B without doing serious damage?” Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>129</sup> A senior UK official said that London had now moved to the view that the priority is stability and thus that they are prepared to swallow a return of the state to the south west. “Let's not keep fighting yesterday's war. At this point, the goal is not to remove Assad but to stabilise the country

Even the Syrian regime and its allies have something to lose from a military conclusion. Military victory will come at a great cost in material and human terms, destroying still more of the country's infrastructure, soldiery and civilian citizenry at a time when Syria is positioning to rebuild. Prior agreement to "deconflict" a regime takeover of the south west can reduce but not entirely eliminate the possibility that Israel becomes alarmed at what it perceives to be an Iranian role and intervenes against the regime and its allies, which could then ignite a regional conflict. Open warfare has its own, uncontrollable dynamics, especially along the politically sensitive Golan armistice line. Moreover, the Syrian regime needs to reckon with not just retaking the south but holding it afterward. The south west's communities and clans will not simply disappear the day after a crushing military advance. Nor will neighbouring countries. The Syrian regime has an interest in a stable, harmonious region south of Damascus and along its borders. Damascus ought to recognise that an offensive that needlessly damages the south's social fabric and breeds new vendettas is bad for Syria.

Meanwhile, Jordan is a necessary political and economic partner for Syria. If violence produces a refugee wave that destabilises Jordan, or sparks unrest in northern Jordanian towns linked by familial ties to Syria's south west, then Damascus suffers.<sup>130</sup> And if Israel secures no pre-negotiated assurances from Russia about Iran's role under a restored Syrian state, that raises the risk that Israel subsequently takes disruptive military action. It means a less stable south west, and a less stable Syria.

With a negotiated deal for the south west, all parties arguably could meet their minimum needs or at least avoid their respective worst-case scenarios. In this context, the de-escalation's guarantors should revive trilateral negotiations beyond the Amman Monitoring Centre's framework, using the existing de-escalation agreement and its associated processes as the vehicle for a more developed and durable accord. A deal's broad outlines already seem relatively clear, even if the details, including timing and mechanisms, are still up for negotiation. First, though, all sides need to shore up the de-escalation and preserve the ceasefire.

#### A. *An Interim Step: "Stabilisation"*

An interim solution for preserving the de-escalation could be a proposal Jordan has developed: moving beyond the de-escalation's initial ceasefire to focus on "stabilisation". This step could save the de-escalation in the near term, even as negotiations continue over how to reorient the de-escalation agreement toward a more comprehensive and enduring settlement.

The Jordanian paradigm for "stabilisation", broadly defined, entails internationally sponsored programming that restores public services and normal economic

---

and avoid destabilising Jordan". Crisis Group interview, London, May 2018. A Western diplomat added: "What everyone wants, at this point, is to avoid chaos. I think that's true for the Jordanian side and, increasingly, for Israel. The issue is less the regime coming back, and more having something not very destabilising". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018.

<sup>130</sup> Asked about recent protests in Amman, President Assad told an interviewer: "We hope for stability for Jordan, not chaos, because that reverberates negatively for us". "President Assad in interview with al-Alam TV", op. cit.

functioning in opposition-held areas, the facilitation of cross-line trade as well as cross-border trade with Jordan, and the progressive linkage of local service institutions to the apparatus of the Syrian state. It would also involve a broader set of international stakeholders, including a larger role for Russia, if only to reassure Moscow that the “stabilisation” zone is not meant to be a prelude to a more lasting territorial arrangement akin to partition. The result would be these areas’ gradual administrative and economic integration into their Syrian regime-held surroundings”.<sup>131</sup>

All sides would need to see that this modified de-escalation remains productive and that negotiated progress is possible. To permit cross-border trade that would satisfy both Jordanian economic interests and Syrian political aims, the three sides should negotiate terms for reopening Nasib and securing the 18km route from the border crossing to Daraa city under the Syrian state’s auspices. The reopening of Nasib would be the clearest proof of the renewed commitment of all sides to the trilateral de-escalation.

In political terms, “stabilisation” would be a means of keeping the trilateral de-escalation process alive, and all parties engaged and motivated. “Stabilisation” would not be an end in itself but a means toward an arrangement all sides can tolerate. It would not entail the permanent maintenance of an anti-state, separate and separatist entity – some “alternative Syria”.<sup>132</sup> Rather, stabilisation would be a step toward the south west’s progressive reintegration into the Syrian whole, building on existing administrative and economic linkages.

For the Syrian leadership, near-term “stabilisation” may be slower and less gratifying than a triumphant military march through the south west and what could be another in the army’s recent string of swift victories. As negotiations are ongoing, however, the better option for Damascus is to exercise patience and allow Jordan to develop its more managed, deliberate approach.

### B. *A Negotiated Deal for the South West*

A more comprehensive deal’s broad outlines seem relatively clear: the return of the Syrian state to the entirety of the south west and the Syrian military to Syria’s borders; a buffer zone parallel to the Golan armistice line to be free of Iranian-linked forces; and the restoration of the 1974 Israel-Syria Separation of Forces Agreement, including the full redeployment of the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF).<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western and Arab diplomats, Amman, April 2018. An Arab diplomat said, “we need to transform this area from one that’s fighting the regime to an area of stabilisation – reviving the economy, restoring basic services, and creating the conditions for refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) return”. Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>132</sup> An Arab diplomat said, “[the de-escalation] is an interim arrangement, as stated in the memorandum of principles. This is a part of Syria. The Syrian government has a role to play. What role and when is still in question. But eventually it will return”. Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018. A Russian diplomat said, “you cannot stabilise Syria without the government. You cannot play it like Kosovo. There were many attempts, funded by the U.S., to have an administration in the ‘liberated’ area. This didn’t work. For Damascus, this would be a reason to go southward”. Crisis Group interview, Moscow, May 2018.

<sup>133</sup> The redeployment of UNDOF peacekeepers is something that is thought to be welcome and reassuring for all sides, including Israel, Syria and Jordan. A Western diplomat said, “it’s a stabilisation

On the details, there is room for negotiation. The details include the deal's timing and mechanisms, but also questions such as exactly what "the return of the Syrian state" would mean.

Damascus's absolute minimum conditions for previous "reconciliations" have been: restoration of Syrian state symbols; return of Syrian civilian police, potentially comprising locals; exit of jihadists and others who reject the deal, or whom Damascus vetoes; incorporation of local armed opposition into Syrian military units, sometimes as entire groups; resolution of locals' legal status, including registration for conscription with a negotiated grace period; and return of municipal administrations, with staff comprising loyalists and in some cases former opposition local council members, and answering to the provincial governor.<sup>134</sup> But these were the terms used previously for encircled pockets in Syria's interior, with no real countervailing international sponsor to negotiate opposite Damascus and its allies. Given the three de-escalation guarantors' continuing stated commitment to the agreement and the strategic importance of Syria's south west to both Jordan and Israel, the aperture for negotiated terms in the south west may be wider.

A negotiated deal would have to be minimally satisfactory for Damascus and its allies if the regime is to refrain from launching a military assault. But the deal should also be maximally accommodating for rebels and other residents of opposition-held areas, within the bounds of what is reasonable and possible. Many Syrians inside the opposition-held south west will not welcome the return of the regime-led state, under any terms. Still, a deal that falls short of their aspirations but, to the extent possible, accommodates their concerns will at least limit armed resistance and pointless bloodshed.

There are various models of state return and control by Damascus, some of which could attract more local opposition buy-in than others. One model for the south west could be the return of a "thin state", with greater continuity between opposition and newly reintegrated state bodies, more local administrative autonomy and exclusion of some of the regime's most feared appendages – its security services and related militias, in particular. "Thin state" return could involve restoration of the state's political symbols and formal authority over opposition areas' local governance structures and armed factions. These entities would initially remain mostly intact but, with active Jordanian and Russian involvement, could be progressively incorporated as "municipalities" and "local security forces" under the umbrella of the Syrian state. Given the decisive upper hand the regime and its allies have established, it is not sustainable for opposition-linked structures to persist, as they are, in open rebellion against Damascus. But these opposition bodies are also organic outgrowths of local communities. Keeping these bodies intact and working through them would secure

---

action, a confidence-building measure to show they all agree that the status quo ante is what they want, to show they're all working to keep it in place and respecting its terms". Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, March and April 2018.

<sup>134</sup> "Reconciliation" agreements differ substantially from one to the next. The list provided in the following two sources synthesises the best conditions found in all the deals. "Local Impact of Reconciliation Agreements" and "Reconciliation and Remobilization", Humanitarian Access Team, op. cit.

more local support for a deal and, with local councils in particular, help ensure continuity of municipal services and relief provision.<sup>135</sup>

There is some precedent for “reconciliations” that stipulate the deployment of Russian military police and the exclusion of regime security agencies, at least for an interim period.<sup>136</sup> In a “thin state” arrangement, local armed factions, Syria’s civilian police and a contingent of Russian military police could jointly maintain security.<sup>137</sup> A relatively significant Russian presence would be important for facilitating the return of state institutions, deterring predation and reprisals, and reassuring both local residents and neighbouring states.<sup>138</sup> The result would be a form of local self-administration under formal Syrian state control, building toward the south’s further integration into the state.

Even if a negotiated deal inclines more toward traditional “reconciliation” and the undivided return of the Syrian state, there are still terms that are better and likely more palatable for residents of the opposition-held south west. A “reconciliation”-type deal should involve as few residents as possible being declared *personae non grata* by state security agencies and bussed, against their will, to the north. Instead, rebels and politically active civilians should be free – as free as possible, in the circumstances – to choose whether to stay and be incorporated into new armed formations, reconstituted Syrian municipalities or relief NGOs. Parties to a deal should negotiate the criteria for which classes and groups in these areas would face compulsory “evacuation” to allow more community leaders to stay and contribute to local security provision and relief efforts.

A deal, likewise, should entail fewer restrictions on civilian movement and commercial access to these areas, which would both energise the local civilian economy and contribute to Syria’s national economic recovery and reconstruction. Rebels and other military-age men should have the option to satisfy their mandatory service requirements in their home areas, whether in the Syrian army, auxiliary forces, local civilian police or economically vital civilian roles in agriculture or reconstruction, not in military units that are deployed farther afield to fight other rebels.

In a “reconciliation”-like scenario, Israeli and Jordanian interests would be best served if their former partners were integrated into the administrative state and local armed units under Damascus’s control, rather than facing crushing military force or “evacuations” that destroyed these areas’ demographic and social fabric. Israeli and Jordanian security benefit from a south the residents of which are ensconced in their families and clans in a relatively healthy, intact southern society, and are thus less vulnerable to recruitment by criminals, jihadists or groups linked to Iran. For rebels and opposition civilians, too, it matters that they not be uprooted

---

<sup>135</sup> “Local Impact of Reconciliation Agreements”, Humanitarian Access Team, op. cit.

<sup>136</sup> For the most recent example, see “Northern Homs countryside signs displacement and ‘reconciliation’ agreement ... these are its terms” (Arabic), *Baladi News*, 2 May 2018; “Northern Homs after the ‘settlement’: The regime returns, despite Russian promises” (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 1 June 2018. Note, however, that regime security services reportedly disregarded these negotiated commitments and entered the area to set up checkpoints on the roads.

<sup>137</sup> Russian military police have manned joint checkpoints with former rebels in the northern Homs countryside. See “‘Talbisah administration’ clarifies circumstances of deployment of Russian forces on international highway” (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 18 May 2018.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, April 2018.

from their homes and communities to find shelter in one of Syria's remaining opposition-held areas, poor and displaced.<sup>139</sup>

An unresolved question concerns the extent to which Russia and the Syrian leadership are willing or able to keep Iranian-linked elements from the south west adjacent to the Golan armistice line under any possible arrangement. The threat of new Israeli strikes may help dissuade Iran and its local allies from entering the south west, particularly at a time when Iran is under newly intense political and economic pressure regionally. At the same time, it remains an open question if rebels and opposition backers have the will and ability to eliminate jihadists in the south west, something that has endangered the de-escalation previously. Any deal will require all parties to undertake to expel jihadists from the area – or efforts at a more peaceful deal will fail.

A deal for the south west that avoids a full-on military offensive will not be totally consensual, and it likely will not be totally non-violent. Some Syrians inside the opposition-held south west will reject any negotiated deal, from a “thin state” to a more far-reaching “reconciliation”.<sup>140</sup> Still, opposition backers should be frank with Syrians in rebel-held areas about their positions and intentions. Southerners have limited insight into the international politics that decide whether they live or die, or where they will have to go. Signals like the 25 May State Department statement have confused southern Syrians about the commitment of their erstwhile international allies and could encourage them to take ill-advised risks. The U.S., Jordan and Israel ought to be clear about what options exist, and then press local residents to pick the best one. Israel should also clarify to Syrians with whom it has collaborated that it will not intervene directly on their behalf, lest they mistakenly assume they have the Israeli military behind them and choose to fight.

Some southerners will fight on nonetheless. Jaysh Khalid, the ISIS affiliate, can be expected to resist, particularly since there is no longer a ready ISIS enclave to which they can be relocated. Other rebels may decide to fight as well, either because they overestimate their state backers' readiness to support them or out of political conviction. Responsible opposition backers need to do what they can to reduce the number of diehard rebels to a bare minimum by negotiating the best possible terms for a resolution in the south and pushing their local partners to comply, if only to spare lives.

---

<sup>139</sup> Alwiyat al-Furqan representative Ghazi Abbas, who is from the western Damascus countryside near Beit Jinn, said, “any faction that leaves its home, whether to Idlib or to Daraa, is humiliated .... If Moro had gone south, he would have received a hero's welcome for two or three days. And then he would have been lost”. Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2018.

<sup>140</sup> Much of Daraa's revolutionary leadership has staked out a defiant position on the regime's threats. For example, see “Political and military leadership in Daraa announces its final position toward the Syrian regime's threats” (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 4 June 2018. Majlis al-Qadaa al-Aala head Asmat al-Absi said, “we're ready for [an offensive]. If we lose kilometres in battle, it's better than handing over a yard of land liberated with the blood of martyrs .... If we start to make concessions, we'll never stop”. Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, June 2018.

## **VI. Conclusion**

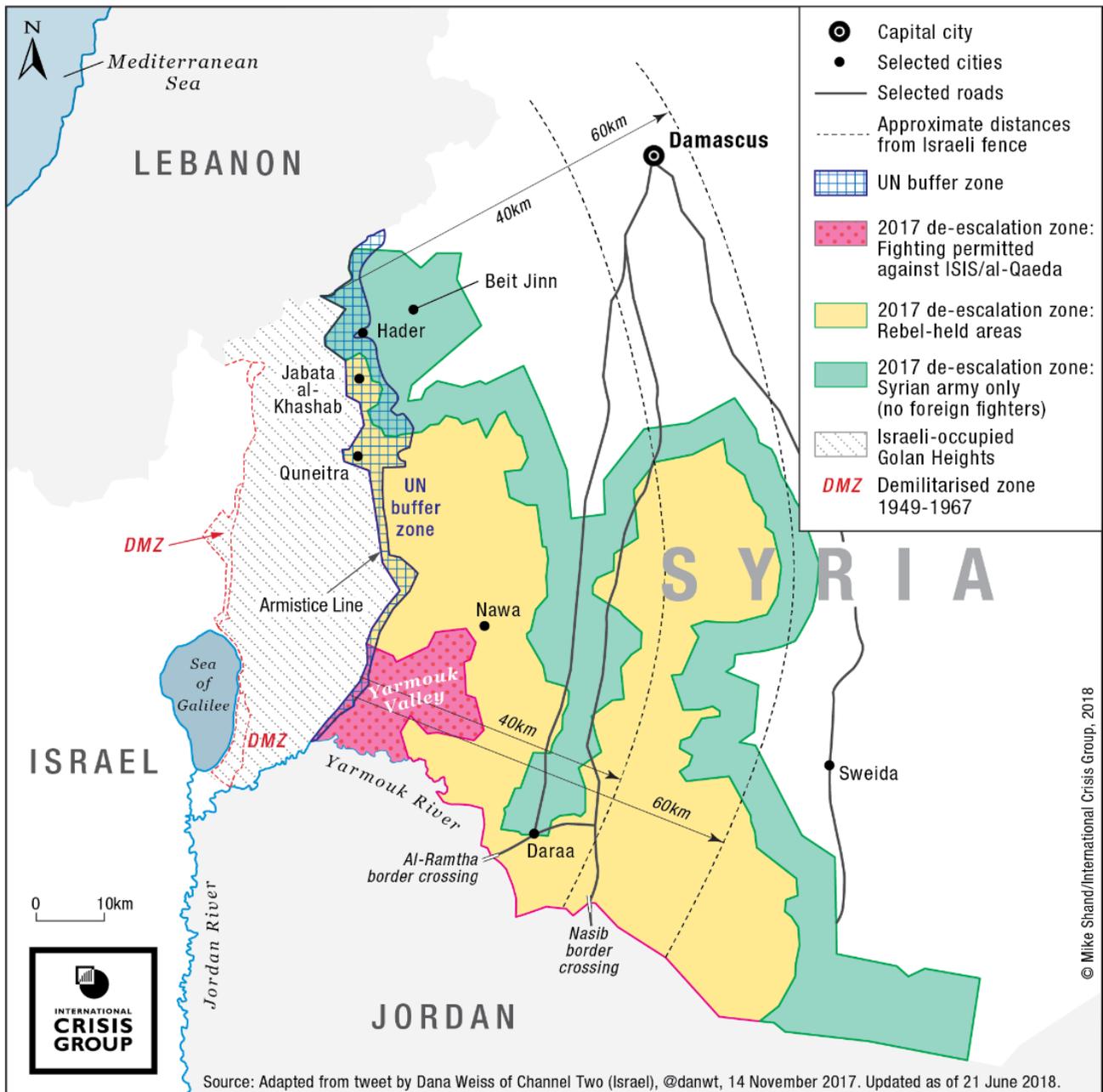
---

The low-grade conflict between Israel and Iran looks set to continue, in Syria and across the region, but a fight for Syria's south west need not be the spark that ignites an open war. The basis for a mostly non-violent, negotiated resolution in the south west exists. But such a resolution will require a diplomatic push by all sides. Rather than allowing the situation to drift, they should seize the moment and use what time is left to work out an agreement.

Without it, an unmediated, more destructive Syrian military offensive appears to be only a matter of time. "Deconfliction" and coordination among external actors may succeed in preventing such an attack from spilling over into regional conflict, which of course would be preferable to the alternative. But if the goal is avoiding a bloody battle for this section of the country, restoring normal life for its war-weary population and ultimately longer-term stability for this volatile borderland, then collective political buy-in for a negotiated settlement is the better and far less costly way.

**Beirut/Amman/Brussels, 21 June 2018**

Appendix A: Map of Syria



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

---

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, European Commission, Directorate General for Neighbourhood Enlargement Negotiations, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Korea Foundation, Oak Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

In addition to its indispensable core donors, Crisis Group acknowledges with gratitude that this report was made possible by special financial assistance from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

**June 2018**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015

### Special Reports

*Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action*, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

### Israel/Palestine

*The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, Middle East Report N°159, 30 June 2015 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*No Exit? Gaza & Israel Between Wars*, Middle East Report N°162, 26 August 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement*, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria*, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

### Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

*Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, Middle East Report N°158, 12 May 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies*, Middle East Report N°160, 20 July 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*New Approach in Southern Syria*, Middle East Report N°163, 2 September 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town*, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Russia's Choice in Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"*, Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

*Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa*, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

*Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar*, Middle East Report N°183, 20 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

*Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°186, 22 May 2018 (also available in Arabic).

### North Africa

*Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°157, 26 February 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Reform and Security Strategy in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°161, 23 July 2015 (also available in French).

*Algeria and Its Neighbours*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°164, 12 October 2015 (also available in French and Arabic).

*The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°165, 3 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, 22 June 2016 (also available in French and Arabic).

*The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, 4 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°171, 21 November 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

*How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic and French).

*How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

*Libya's Unhealthy Focus on Personalities*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°57, 8 May 2018.

*Making the Best of France's Libya Summit*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°58, 28 May 2018 (also available in French).

### **Iran/Yemen/Gulf**

*Yemen at War*, Middle East Briefing N°45, 27 March 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, Middle East Report N°166, 15 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, Middle East Report N°167, 9 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals*, Middle East Briefing N°51, 13 December 2016 (also available in Farsi).

*Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report*, Middle East Report N°173, 16 January 2017 (also available in Farsi).

*Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, Middle East Report N°174, 2 February 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, Middle East Briefing N°52, 13 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Discord in Yemen's North Could Be a Chance for Peace*, Middle East Briefing N°54, 11 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report*, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

*Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East*, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

*How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal*, Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).

*Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida*, Middle East Briefing N°59, 11 June 2018.

## Appendix D: International Crisis Group Board of Trustees

### CO-CHAIR

**Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown**  
Former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

### PRESIDENT & CEO

**Robert Malley**  
Former White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region

### VICE-CHAIR

**Ayo Obe**  
Chair of the Board of the Gorée Institute (Senegal); Legal Practitioner (Nigeria)

### OTHER TRUSTEES

**Fola Adeola**  
Founder and Chairman, FATE Foundation

**Celso Amorim**  
Former Minister of External Relations of Brazil; Former Defence Minister

**Hushang Ansary**  
Chairman, Parman Capital Group LLC; Former Iranian Ambassador to the U.S. and Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs

**Nahum Barnea**  
Political Columnist, Israel

**Kim Beazley**  
Former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia and Ambassador to the U.S.; Former Defence Minister

**Carl Bildt**  
Former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Sweden

**Emma Bonino**  
Former Foreign Minister of Italy and European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid

**Cheryl Carolus**  
Former South African High Commissioner to the UK and Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC)

**Maria Livanos Cattau**  
Former Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce

**Wesley Clark**  
Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander

**Sheila Coronel**  
Toni Stabile Professor of Practice in Investigative Journalism; Director, Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism, Columbia University

**Frank Giustra**  
President & CEO, Fiore Group

**Mo Ibrahim**  
Founder and Chair, Mo Ibrahim Foundation; Founder, Celtel International

**Wolfgang Ischinger**  
Chairman, Munich Security Conference; Former German Deputy Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the UK and U.S.

**Yoriko Kawaguchi**  
Former Foreign Minister of Japan; former Environment Minister

**Wadah Khanfar**  
Co-Founder, Al Sharq Forum; former Director General, Al Jazeera Network

**Wim Kok**  
Former Prime Minister of the Netherlands

**Andrey Kortunov**  
Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council

**Ivan Krastev**  
Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies (Sofia); Founding Board Member of European Council on Foreign Relations

**Ricardo Lagos**  
Former President of Chile

**Joanne Leedom-Ackerman**  
Former International Secretary of PEN International; Novelist and journalist, U.S.

**Helge Lund**  
Former Chief Executive BG Group (UK) and Statoil (Norway)

**Shivshankar Menon**  
Former Foreign Secretary of India; former National Security Advisor

**Naz Modirzadeh**  
Director of the Harvard Law School Program on International Law and Armed Conflict

**Saad Mohseni**  
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of MOBY Group

**Marty Natalegawa**  
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Permanent Representative to the UN, and Ambassador to the UK

**Roza Otunbayeva**  
Former President of the Kyrgyz Republic; Founder of the International Public Foundation "Roza Otunbayeva Initiative"

**Thomas R. Pickering**  
Former U.S. Under Secretary of State and Ambassador to the UN, Russia, India, Israel, Jordan, El Salvador and Nigeria

**Olympia Snowe**  
Former U.S. Senator and Member of the House of Representatives

**Javier Solana**  
President, ESADE Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics; Distinguished Fellow, The Brookings Institution

**Alexander Soros**  
Deputy Chair of the Global Board, Open Society Foundations

**George Soros**  
Founder, Open Society Foundations and Chair, Soros Fund Management

**Pär Stenbäck**  
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and of Education, Finland; Chairman of the European Cultural Parliament

**Jonas Gahr Støre**  
Leader of the Labour Party and Labour Party Parliamentary Group; former Foreign Minister of Norway

**Lawrence H. Summers**  
Former Director of the U.S. National Economic Council and Secretary of the U.S. Treasury; President Emeritus of Harvard University

**Helle Thorning-Schmidt**  
CEO of Save the Children International; former Prime Minister of Denmark

**Wang Jisi**  
Member, Foreign Policy Advisory Committee of the Chinese Foreign Ministry; President, Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University

**PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL**

A distinguished group of individual and corporate donors providing essential support and expertise to Crisis Group.

CORPORATE	INDIVIDUAL	
<b>BP</b>	<b>(5) Anonymous</b>	<b>Stephen Robert</b>
<b>Shearman &amp; Sterling LLP</b>	<b>Scott Bessent</b>	<b>Ludék Sekyra</b>
<b>Statoil (U.K.) Ltd.</b>	<b>David Brown &amp; Erika Franke</b>	<b>Alexander Soros</b>
<b>White &amp; Case LLP</b>	<b>Herman De Bode</b>	<b>Ian R. Taylor</b>

**INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL**

Individual and corporate supporters who play a key role in Crisis Group's efforts to prevent deadly conflict.

CORPORATE	INDIVIDUAL	
<b>Anonymous</b>	<b>(3) Anonymous</b>	<b>Faisal Khan</b>
<b>APCO Worldwide Inc.</b>	<b>Mark Bergman</b>	<b>Cleopatra Kitt</b>
<b>Atlas Copco AB</b>	<b>Stanley Bergman &amp; Edward Bergman</b>	<b>Michael &amp; Jackie Lambert</b>
<b>Chevron</b>	<b>David &amp; Katherine Bradley</b>	<b>Samantha Lasry</b>
<b>Edelman UK</b>	<b>Eric Christiansen</b>	<b>Leslie Lishon</b>
<b>Eni</b>	<b>Sam Englehardt</b>	<b>Malcolm Hewitt Wiener Foundation</b>
<b>HSBC Holdings Plc</b>	<b>The Edelman Family Foundation</b>	<b>The New York Community Trust – Lise Strickler &amp; Mark Gallogly Charitable Fund</b>
<b>MetLife</b>	<b>Seth &amp; Jane Ginns</b>	<b>The Nommontu Foundation</b>
<b>Noble Energy</b>	<b>Ronald Glickman</b>	<b>Brian Paes-Braga</b>
<b>RBC Capital Markets</b>	<b>David Harding</b>	<b>Kerry Propper</b>
<b>Shell</b>	<b>Geoffrey R. Hogue &amp; Ana Luisa Ponti</b>	<b>Duco Sickinghe</b>
	<b>Geoffrey Hsu</b>	<b>Nina K. Solarz</b>
	<b>David Jannetti</b>	<b>Clayton E. Swisher</b>
		<b>Enzo Viscusi</b>

**AMBASSADOR COUNCIL**

Rising stars from diverse fields who contribute their talents and expertise to support Crisis Group's mission.

<b>Amy Benziger</b>	<b>Lindsay Iversen</b>	<b>Nidhi Sinha</b>
<b>Tripp Callan</b>	<b>Azim Jamal</b>	<b>Chloe Squires</b>
<b>Kivanc Cubukcu</b>	<b>Arohi Jain</b>	<b>Leeanne Su</b>
<b>Matthew Devlin</b>	<b>Christopher Louney</b>	<b>Bobbi Thomason</b>
<b>Victoria Ergolavou</b>	<b>Matthew Magenheimer</b>	<b>AJ Twombly</b>
<b>Noa Gafni</b>	<b>Madison Malloch-Brown</b>	<b>Dillon Twombly</b>
<b>Christina Bache</b>	<b>Megan McGill</b>	<b>Annie Verderosa</b>
<b>Lynda Hammes</b>	<b>Hamesh Mehta</b>	<b>Zachary Watling</b>
<b>Jason Hesse</b>	<b>Tara Opalinski</b>	<b>Grant Webster</b>
<b>Dali ten Hove</b>	<b>Perfecto Sanchez</b>	

**SENIOR ADVISERS**

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

<b>Martti Ahtisaari</b> Chairman Emeritus	<b>Lakhdar Brahimi</b>	<b>Swanee Hunt</b>
<b>George Mitchell</b> Chairman Emeritus	<b>Kim Campbell</b>	<b>Aleksander Kwasniewski</b>
<b>Gareth Evans</b> President Emeritus	<b>Jorge Castañeda</b>	<b>Todung Mulya Lubis</b>
<b>Kenneth Adelman</b>	<b>Naresh Chandra</b>	<b>Allan J. MacEachen</b>
<b>Adnan Abu-Odeh</b>	<b>Eugene Chien</b>	<b>Graça Machel</b>
<b>HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal</b>	<b>Joaquim Alberto Chissano</b>	<b>Jessica T. Mathews</b>
<b>Óscar Arias</b>	<b>Victor Chu</b>	<b>Barbara McDougall</b>
<b>Ersin Arioğlu</b>	<b>Mong Joon Chung</b>	<b>Matthew McHugh</b>
<b>Richard Armitage</b>	<b>Pat Cox</b>	<b>Miklós Németh</b>
<b>Diego Arria</b>	<b>Gianfranco Dell'Alba</b>	<b>Christine Ockrent</b>
<b>Zainab Bangura</b>	<b>Jacques Delors</b>	<b>Timothy Ong</b>
<b>Shlomo Ben-Ami</b>	<b>Alain Destexhe</b>	<b>Olara Otunnu</b>
<b>Christoph Bertram</b>	<b>Mou-Shih Ding</b>	<b>Lord (Christopher) Patten</b>
<b>Alan Blinken</b>	<b>Uffe Ellemann-Jensen</b>	<b>Victor Pinchuk</b>
	<b>Gernot Erler</b>	<b>Surin Pitsuwan</b>
	<b>Marika Fahlén</b>	<b>Fidel V. Ramos</b>
	<b>Stanley Fischer</b>	
	<b>Carla Hills</b>	