

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE LATEST MILITARY OFFENSIVE ON DARA'A

Who are the conflict parties fighting?

- Syrian regime forces are waging a military offensive on the province of Dara'a in southern Syria. These forces include the official Syrian army as well as paramilitary groups such as the Russian-supported notorious Tiger Forces.
- Russian warplanes are aiding the regime's military offensive, while Iranian-affiliated militias such as Liwa'a Abu Fadel al-Abbas are participating in the ground offensive.
- The opposition forces repelling the regime offensive are the Free Syrian Army Southern Front, which consists of several battalions in different areas. Many of these battalions are led by Syrian army defectors.
- The opposition groups in the south used to receive arms and financial support from the MOC, the covert intelligence operations room run by opposition-backing countries (US, UK, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and UAE). Since US president Donald Trump announced the end of the MOC program in 2017, opposition groups have either relied on themselves or on political opposition figures affiliated with regional countries.

De-Escalation

- Dara'a was included as part of the de-escalation zones reached in early 2017 as part of the Astana framework, with de-escalation in this area in particular agreed on and guaranteed by Russia, the US and Jordan.
- The rationale behind the de-escalation zones was to end confrontations among conflict parties, expand the de-escalation to a ceasefire across the country, and create a suitable environment for political negotiations to resolve the conflict.
- Even before the de-escalation agreement was in place, fronts between the regime and the opposition were largely silent in the south. Despite numerous regime offensives on previous opposition strongholds such as Darayya, Eastern Ghouta, and other areas in Damascus countryside, where Dara'a is only a few kilometres away, the FSA Southern Front kept its ground. This is believed to be a result of constraints and pressure exerted by the FSA Southern Front's external backers to contain military fronts in the south.
- Terms of the de-escalation largely revolved around the interests of external actors primarily, including the security of Israel and Jordan with regards to the presence of Iranian militias or displacement waves.

Conflict Impact

- The Syrian regime's violating offensive on the de-escalation area in the south has already killed around 60 civilians and wounded many more. The UN has announced that at least 270,000 people have already been internally displaced in the south-west region since June 18th. Around 15 displaced civilians near the Jordanian border lost their lives due to dire conditions such as diseases and thirst.

- With Syrian regime forces on the offensive on one side, and the Jordan border deliberately closed, displaced civilians are effectively trapped and are residing in make-shift tents near the border with insufficient food, water or medicine.
- Indiscriminate bombing has repeatedly targeted medical centers, with field hospitals in al-Harak, Busr al-Harir, Mseifra, Seida and al-Jiza targeted, according to Amnesty International.

Responses of external actors:

- UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for an immediate cessation to the military operations in Dara'a. UN human rights chief warned that civilians are under risk of being besieged and being subjected to bombardment that would lead to a "catastrophe".
- Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova legitimized the regime's offensive with the continued excuse of fighting al-Nusra and ISIS presence in the area (despite the fact that opposition groups that have already surrendered to the regime do not include any Nusra or ISIS groups).
- A letter made public apparently from the United States to the rebels in the south made clear they would not be involved in stopping the offensive in the de-escalation area to which they are a guarantor.
- Jordan's Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz announced that it will not admit Syrians displaced from the fighting into their country. It has, however, delivered cross-border aid to those displaced and is engaged in diplomatic talks with Russia to contain the situation.
- UK Minister for the Middle East Alistair Burt expressed concern at the Assad regime's attacks and urged Russian commitment under the de-escalation agreement.

Status of negotiations:

- Representatives from the opposition in the south and Russia have already met three times for negotiations in Amman over the past few days, but have failed to produce any outcome.
- The Russians are practically demanding the surrender of the opposition, whereby the opposition would hand over their heavy and medium weapons and join the "fifth corps" of the Syrian army to fight "terrorism". On the side, Russia has already brokered what it calls "reconciliation deals", under the threat of force, with armed opposition groups in specific areas in which Syrian regime forces have entered.
- The opposition is demanding that armed groups and civilian structures remain responsible for administering areas in the south, keeping only its medium and light weapons, and sharing control of the Nassib border crossing to Jordan with the regime/Russia.

Dara'a significance

- Economically, Dara'a is a bordering province with Jordan in which the Nassib crossing stands as a major trade route, which the Syrian regime seeks to take control of in order to bolster its economic recovery.
- Politically, the offensive to seize control of the south is part of the regime's grander plan to militarily take back all areas in the country outside its control in order to strengthen its leveraging power in negotiations (if political talks commence in any case).
- Symbolically, Dara'a was where the Syrian uprising that called for freedom, dignity and justice all began - the "Cradle of the Revolution". The opposition's defeat in this area would significantly weaken its morale and consolidate the regime's exaggerated and misleading narrative of a "war on terror".

Rethink Rebuild Society's Position

- RR strongly condemns the Syrian regime's violation of the de-escalation zone and its continued insistence on waging military offensives on civilian-populated areas that leaves them at risk.
- RR interprets the Syrian regime's actions as demonstration of its unwillingness to end the conflict and civilians' suffering, and to seriously engage with a political process that meets the Syrian people's aspirations for democracy and addresses their grievances.
- Recent developments in Dara'a demonstrate the vulnerability of externally-guaranteed agreements that are subject to continuous changes of balances, dynamics and understandings. It shows that foreign countries involved in "managing" the conflict are not really serious about peace, but about the pursuit of their narrow interests at the expense of the well-being of Syrians. That is why RR is wary of external actors' involvement in de-escalation and the political process, and strongly advocates for a Syrian-led political process.
- The perspective offered by RR on the situation in the south is that the reintegration of the Dara'a region and the armed forces back into the state structure must be made within the framework of a political solution that concurrently addresses the country's post-conflict governance political system, accountability and transitional justice, security sector reform and human rights abuses, return of refugees and internally displaced, fate of detainees, and reconstruction.
- RR thus urges the UK Government to engage through diplomatic channels in pushing for renewed talks over a ceasefire and halt the regime's military offensive in order to prevent another humanitarian catastrophe that leads to the drastic loss of life and permanent displacement of families. By stopping this offensive, and with the assumption of a standing de-escalation in the north-west and north-east regions, the Syrian regime will have no further fronts to open and will no longer have excuses to refrain from serious engagement with the political process.