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The Battle for Daraa: Shifting the Balance in Syria?

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The battles underway since February 2015 in the Daraa district in southern Syria between the Syrian army, the Iranian Quds forces, and Hizbollah on the one hand, and various rebel groups and organizations on the other, are important for the actors involved, as well as for those not involved. These battles are part of a struggle for control of the Damascus-Quneitra-Daraa triangle, a crucial area for both the consolidation of the Bashar al-Assad regime and its overthrow. The opposing sides attribute great importance to the results of the campaign – referred to in Syria as the “mother of all battles” – and are preparing for long, difficult fighting before there might be any decision. The city of Daraa lies in the southern district, also known as Hauran or the Syrian Golan. Even though most of the battles are in the rural area to the north, the city itself is very important, because it is usually cited as the place where the war in Syria began in March 2011. Victory in the campaign therefore may also indicate that the deadlock in the war is destined to end, and the winner will gain power and prestige that are essential in the struggle for Syria.

The “axis”: From the perspective of the Tehran-led axis, which includes the Assad regime and Hizbollah, the battle for Daraa is designed to achieve several aims. In general terms, it is part of the current Iranian strategy to create a situation in which the Islamic Republic has acknowledged military outposts at many points in the Middle East, as in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. In this vein, the visit by Quds forces commander Qasem Suleimani, who came to get a firsthand impression and underscore how essential Tehran regards the battle taking place in the area, garnered much attention as was well publicized. On the concrete level, the axis elements realize that a continued hold by the rebels of part of the territory in the Daraa district poses a real threat to Damascus, which lies a few dozen kilometers to the north. Furthermore, this region is important for the direct Syrian front against Israel. The killing of Hizbollah operatives and Quds soldiers in January 2015, attributed to Israel, and Hizbollah’s fire against Israel in the Ghajar area in response, brought to the surface the ongoing process by Hizbollah, backed by Iran, of creating an operational infrastructure in the Golan Heights. The axis is trying to gain control of the area near the border with Israel, including the Quneitra district (which is small than the Daraa district, and located to the west of it). Until the offensive by the axis

in February, this district was controlled primarily by various rebel factions. Stabilizing a front controlled by the axis from the Daraa district will therefore help construct a new equation vis-à-vis Israel that will in effect unify this territory from the Syrian Hermon to southern Lebanon, and give Hizbollah strategic depth.

The rebels: From the rebels' perspective, the battle for Daraa has decisive significance. Throughout Syria, or more precisely, in the geographic units created on the ruins of the country, a balance has been established between the rebels and the regime, with no decision on the horizon. Assad has thus far managed, with the help of his allies, to remain at the head of the government in part because the many groups operating against the regime are hard pressed to unite in a coordinated and powerful campaign to overthrow the Syrian president. The southern front, with Daraa at its center, is one of the signs of the rebels' success. The various factions – the most prominent are identified with the Free Syrian Army, and some with Jabhat al-Nusra – have succeeded in cooperating and gaining control of most of the Daraa and Quneitra districts from the regime's crumbling army, including symbols of government and key territories, such as Tel al-Hara and the border crossing at Quneitra. The degree to which the rebels succeed in withstanding the axis's large scale military offensive in the Daraa district will be a major indication of their resilience and their further potential. If they manage to repel the attack, as they have until now, their opposition to Assad and their ability to cooperate with each other for the sake of their common goal will be strengthened. A defeat, on the other hand, will deal a critical blow to their influence in the south of the country. The Islamic State organization, the enemy of most of the organizations on the southern front, has not yet achieved a significant foothold in the region, but has already won support among the civilian population and other parties in the area. These include the Salafi group Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk, which operates in the southern Syrian Golan, and has sworn allegiance to Islamic State. This group's military activity in the al-Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus highlights its intentions and capabilities. If the rebels lose the battle for Daraa, Islamic State's influence in this region may gradually increase.

The results of the battle for Daraa will be very significant not only for control of the southern front on Syrian land, but to a great extent also for other fronts, and even for actors that are not directly taking part in the battles. These include Jordan and Israel, which are carefully following events on this front.

Daraa is only a few kilometers from the border between Syria and Jordan. Most of the population there is Sunni, and its residents have historic ties with the southern side of the border. Until now, events in the Daraa district have made Jordan an essential border crossing for masses of Syrian refugees (estimated at more than one million) on their way to Jordanian territory. Jordanian cooperation with the Free Syrian Army, mainly in intelligence, has enabled the kingdom to contain the infiltration of potential terrorism by

Salafi jihad groups from Syria. Once Jordan itself is subject to internal tensions that threaten its stability, however, particularly after the killing of the Jordan pilot by Islamic State, the Hashemite royal house is increasingly determined to prevent the spread of the warfare in Syria southward and keep the axis from conquering territory in the area. Any development in this direction will threaten Jordanian interests, both due to a hostile Iranian presence on its border and the danger of Islamic State influence among the defeated rebels.

For Israel, the conquest of the Daraa district by Hizbollah and Iranian forces will make the threat from the axis tangible and more explosive than in the current situation, in which there is no clear winner in the battle. A victory by the axis, which will give the Assad regime quiet and consolidate the southern part of the commercial and demographic centers of “little Syria” (Aleppo-Latakia-Hama-Homs-Damascus-Daraa), will deepen Assad’s dependence on Iran and Hizbollah, and aggravate Israeli and Jordanian concern about the presence of these forces in the proximity of the border with the Syrian Golan. The recent attacks against advanced weapons transfers in the Damascus area, attributed to Israel, testify to Israel’s concern regarding Hizbollah’s military force buildup. At the same time, a victory by axis elements will weaken the anti-regime rebels currently fighting on this front, thereby making it easier for Islamic State, which until now has had little success in southern Syria, to infiltrate the region.

A rebel victory in the battles in the Daraa district, on the other hand, or no decision, will leave the balance of power in the region as it is now. This situation, which is better for Israel and Jordan, will create a problem for the axis: northward, on the Syrian-Lebanese border, a battle is developing between the Salafi Islam forces, led by Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, and Hizbollah. A Hizbollah defeat along the southern part of the border, i.e., the Daraa district, will not only put Damascus in danger; it will also threaten the Lebanese organization on its home territory. A new situation is also developing in Lebanon, since Hizbollah will be forced to fight for its standing. On the other hand, in the long term, Israel will have to cope with the strengthened forces of the rebel Syrian factions in the Golan Heights.

The possible lines of development in the Daraa district, with their consequences for the future of Syria in general – a victory by the axis, a victory by the rebels, or no decision – will not be comfortable for Israel. At the same time, it can be assumed that the problematic consequences of a victory by the axis will be more immediate than the challenge that will be created for Israel by a victory of the rebel forces.