



Russia and Aligned Former Opposition Fighters Leverage Growing Anti-Assad Sentiment to Expand Control in Southern Syria

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Key Takeaway: *Russia and a group of reconciled former opposition fighters under its patronage are taking advantage of growing anti-Assad and anti-Iran sentiment to forcibly expand their influence in southern Syria independent of the regime in Damascus. A prominent Russian-backed former opposition commander announced the formation of a new “army” that plans to centralize forces across much of the province under his control. A newly established Russian-backed political body will likely parallel this new force. The creation of this new army and political body will likely increase Russian influence and could threaten the ability of the Assad regime and Iran to impose their will in this key region bordering US allies Israel and Jordan.*

Russian-backed Former Opposition Fighters Capitalize on Anti-Regime Sentiment to Form New Regional “Army”

Russia, Iran, and Assad have competed for resources, power, and influence in the key region of Dera’a Province since the pro-Assad coalition recaptured the region in the summer of 2018.¹ Sporadic clashes and arrests between various Assad-, Iranian-, and Russian-backed forces are a regular occurrence, while anti-Assad insurgents have mounted a growing campaign to target pro-regime forces across the region since the regime takeover in 2018.² During the 2018 regime takeover, Assad relied on Russia to broker a series of so-called “reconciliation” agreements allowing pro-regime forces to move into many towns and villages without having to fight block-by-block.³ While the terms of each individual agreement varied by location, many included provisions allowing opposition fighters to join pro-regime units to avoid arrest.⁴ Perhaps the most prominent of these units is the Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 5th Corps, established in 2016.⁵

Russian- and Iranian-backed groups are competing, occasionally violently, over the same pool of recruits to expand their influence in Dera’a Province. Russia has made a particularly concerted effort to build and grow the 5th Corps using local and reconciled fighters.⁶ Russia, Iran, and Assad are further attempting to leverage the forces they back to control key trade and smuggling routes between Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the eastern desert to Iraq. This competition between Assad, Russia, and Iran escalated to a new level on June 20, when alleged Iranian-backed militants attacked a unit of Russian-backed Syrian forces comprised largely of former opposition fighters.⁷ This roadside improvised explosive device (IED) attack targeted a bus carrying 40 members of the 8th Brigade of the Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 5th Corps killed 9 members and injured dozens.⁸ An unspecified local source reportedly close to 8th Brigade leadership claimed that “Iran is directly responsible” for the attack. The source claimed the attack was meant to discourage defections from Iranian-backed Syrian groups to Russian-backed groups.⁹ The location of the attack near Saida also indicates that control over key trade and smuggling routes was part of the motivation for the attack as Saida lies on a major road junction north of the Nassib border crossing with Jordan.

The day after the attack, over 2,000 people protested in the southeastern Dera’a town of Busra al-Sham, where the 8th Brigade is headquartered. Protesters called for the fall of Assad and the removal of Iranian-backed forces from the region in one of the largest public demonstrations in the province in the last two years.¹⁰ Protests with similar demands have followed in several towns and villages across both eastern and western Dera’a Province since the June 20 attack.¹¹

Buoyed by the ever-growing anti-Iran and anti-Assad sentiments in the region, Russian-backed leader of the 8th Brigade Ahmed al-Awdeh (aka Abu Hamza) addressed mourners and protesters on June 23 from a condolence tent

dedicated to the victims of the June 20 IED attack. Awdeh said, “soon Horan [a region spanning much of Dera’a, Quneitra, and Suwayda Provinces] will be one body and one army, and this formation will not only protect Horan, but also will be the most powerful tool to protect Syria.”¹² Awdeh has not yet announced the exact size, scope, or timeline for this new formation, which ISW is tentatively referring to as the “Horan Army.” However, an unspecified former opposition commander and member of the Russian-backed Dera’a Central Negotiating Committee reported the army will form soon and consist of a “central body and command” representing unspecified areas of eastern and western Dera’a Province as well as the former opposition stronghold neighborhood of Dera’a al Balad in Dera’a City.¹³ Whether this statement reflects a concrete agenda as opposed to more aspirational sentiments is unclear. However, any one component of such a reorganization coming to fruition would represent a major shift in the currently de-centralized and localized security apparatus of Dera’a Province.

Ahmed al-Awdeh and Russia Build a Symbiotic Relationship in Dera’a Province

Awdeh led the Shabaab al-Sunnah opposition group prior to the regime takeover of southern Syria but has retained close ties to Russian forces following Shabaab al-Sunnah’s surrender to pro-regime forces in July 2018.¹⁴ Shabaab al-Sunnah was a major component group of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)-branded Southern Front and controlled an area of southeastern Dera’a Province around the town of Busra al-Sham. Bursra al-Sham is notable for its large Shi’a population relative to the surrounding area.¹⁵ Awdeh was one of the first opposition leaders to accept a Russian settlement and began handing Shabaab al-Sunnah’s heavy weaponry over to the Russian Military Police (MP) in early July 2018.¹⁶ Awdeh likely saw the settlement as an opportunity to appease a militarily dominant Russia and secure himself a leading role in the newly established order. Subsequently, Awdeh and former opposition fighters joined the ranks of the SAA 5th Corps under a Russian promise to protect them from Assad loyalist retribution.¹⁷ Through Awdeh, Russia was able to secure the eastern region of Dera’a Province and extend the SAA 5th Corps footprint in southern Syria.¹⁸ Russia and Awdeh built a system of cooperation based on mutually favorable conditions, not loyalty, that remains in place to the present day.¹⁹

While Russia may not have initiated the move to build the Horan Army, Russia will likely support Awdeh in his efforts to build the formation. Russia may assess that current anti-Assad and anti-Iran sentiments in Dera’a Province will make countering the Horan Army more difficult both militarily and politically. The lack of similarly strong anti-Russian sentiment in the region presents Russia with an opportunity to leverage the Horan Army as a means of exerting Russian influence. Russia is also able to insulate itself from having to participate in the tactical-level abuses that have driven much of the local resentment toward Assad and Iran by employing local forces with some level of public legitimacy to engage in policing on its behalf. The Russian and Awdeh dynamic does not openly undermine the Syrian regime, but it adds another layer of complexity to the regime’s reconsolidation plans in southern Syria.²⁰ Russia has further shown no signs of trying to stop Awdeh or replace him – moves the Kremlin would likely undertake if it suspected the Horan Army would become an obstacle.

5th Corps Units Assert Themselves after Awdeh’s Announcement of Horan Army

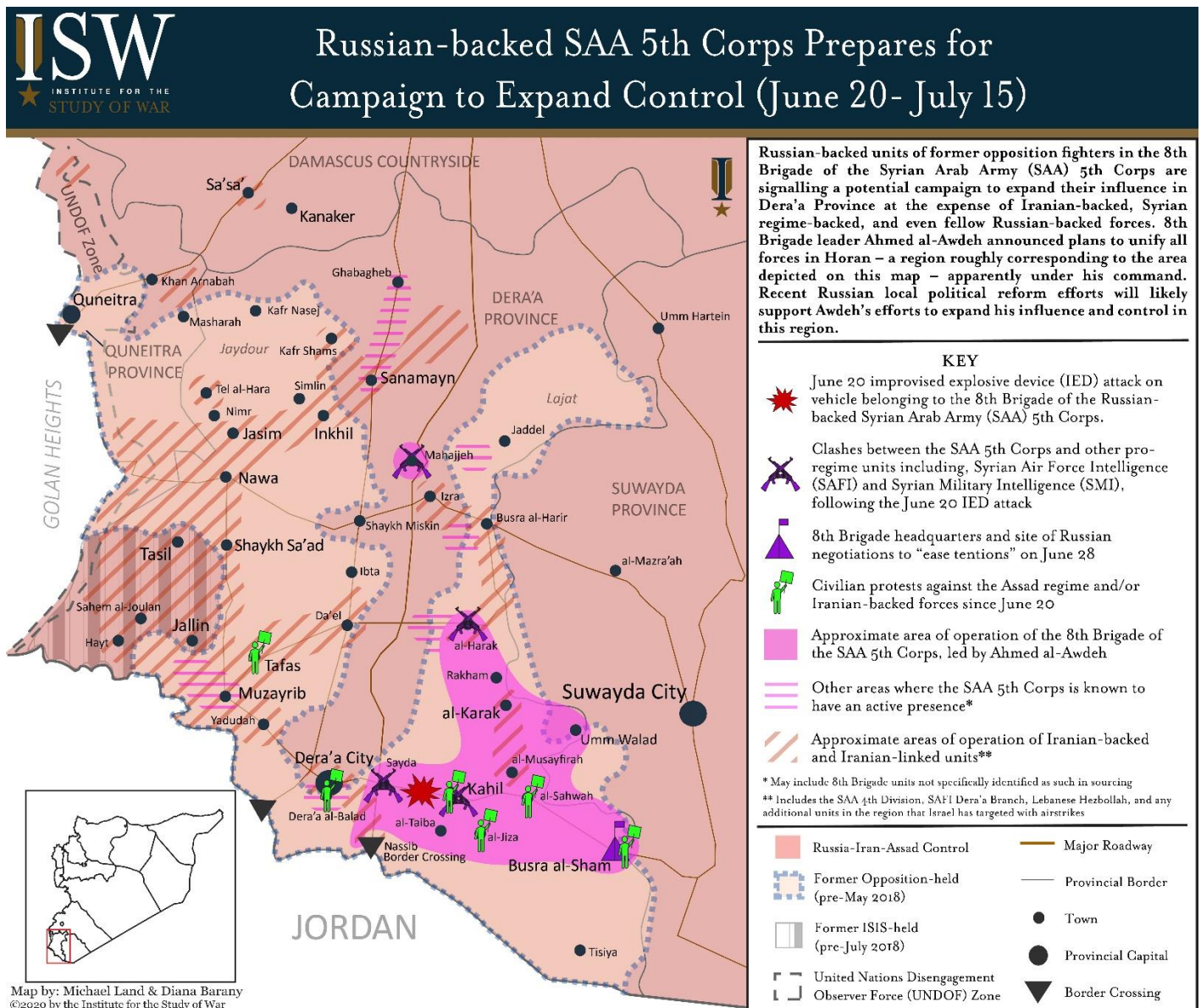
Ahmed al Awdeh is driving the 8th Brigade’s campaign to consolidate power in Dera’a under his control and is building a better position to engage with the Russians as a legitimate powerbroker in Dera’a. As events unfolded in late June, Awdeh seized upon increasing local discontent with the regime and Iranian-backed forces as an opportunity to pursue his goal of controlling larger areas of the Horan. Shortly after Awdeh’s announcement of the new Horan Army, forces under his command began to assert themselves against other pro-regime forces in Dera’a Province. 8th Brigade forces attacked an Iranian-linked Syrian Air Force Intelligence (SAFI) checkpoint in the town of Herak in eastern Dera’a Province to secure the release of an unknown detainee on June 25.²¹

The 8th Brigade later clashed with Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) forces at a checkpoint in Mahajjeh, 37 km north of Dera’a City, on June 27.²² The clashes resulted in the death of at least one 8th Brigade member and two SMI members.²³ The exchange was unusual, not only for taking place well outside the typical 8th Brigade areas of operation in southeastern Dera’a Province, but also because SMI has previously maintained positive relations with Russia, albeit not to the same extent as the 5th Corps.²⁴ The 5th Corps sent reinforcements to the area and seized two SMI checkpoints in Kahil and Saida, 12 km east of Dera’a City, the same day.²⁵ Again, the location of the clashes along the Dera’a-Suwayda highway near Saida could indicate Awdeh was attempting to consolidate control over trade routes at the edges of the 8th Brigade’s areas of operation. The 8th Brigade’s aggression against SMI indicates

that Awdeh is willing to target forces with ties to Russia as well as Assad loyalists and Iranian-backed forces as part of his expansionist efforts.

Following this round of clashes in late June, civilians protested at the funeral of one of the 8th Brigade members, calling for the toppling of the Syrian regime, the release of detainees, and the removal of Iranian forces in the town of Kahil. Similar protest took place in Tafas and Sahwa on June 28.²⁶ The protests at 8th Brigade funerals underscore the public support for Awdeh and the forces he commands, even when the deaths were not the result of regime or Iranian targeting.

Two weeks after the 5th Corps clashes with Assad and Iranian-aligned forces, a “leaked” recording circulated in the media showing a new 8th Brigade training camp in the Busra al-Sham Citadel on July 12.²⁷ The 8th Brigade likely leaked the video intentionally to portray the unit’s professionalism and depict it as competent and organized. The new training camp reportedly hosts 900 recruits that are under the supervision of Awdeh’s commanders and will graduate in the presence of Russian officers at an unspecified date.²⁸



New Russian-backed Political Initiatives Complement Military Actions

A Russian delegation reportedly arrived in Busra al Sham on July 12 to mediate and “ease the tension” in the area on June 28.²⁹ Awdeh reportedly set the withdrawal of all regime forces checkpoints from eastern Dera'a Province as a condition to solving the tension between the 8th Brigade and unspecified regime forces.³⁰ Russia may also be

attempting to gain the goodwill of the population by beginning to address another major point of contention: the release of detainees. The Russian Center for Reconciliation opened an office in Dera'a City where locals can inquire and follow up on the status of the detainees on June 4.³¹ The office reportedly was successful in releasing some detainees.³² Regular clashes between Russian-backed units and other pro-regime forces remain ongoing despite the negotiations.³³ Protests aimed at the toppling of the Assad regime, removal of Iranian militias, and the release of detainees likewise continued in the western Dera'a towns of Tafas and Jiza on July 10.³⁴

Members of the Russian-supported local negotiating body in Dera'a Province, the Dera'a Central Committee, reportedly met and agreed to unify the localized committee under one body. The newly unified committee, tentatively referred to as the "National Committee," will reportedly "represent the population" and negotiate with the regime on behalf of the people.³⁵ Awdeh and two other Russian-affiliated former opposition commanders will reportedly lead the new National Committee along with nine representatives from Dera'a City and eastern and western Dera'a Province, similar to the reported structure of the Horan Army's leadership.³⁶ The formal announcement of the National Committee was reportedly slated for June 12, but there have been no follow up reports. The announcement may have been delayed due to the assassination of a "leading" member of the Dera'a Central Committee in Jasim on June 12.³⁷

Implications and Forecast

Russia remains entrenched in Syria, and Assad's control over key regions such as the south remains weak as actors like Awdeh push for more control at the expense of Damascus. Anti-regime and anti-Iranian sentiment, along with al Awdeh's growing popularity in Dera'a Province, paved the way for increased Russian entrenchment in southern Syria. Russia can use this power to further its campaign to establish itself as a peacemaker for local conflicts both in Syria and across the globe at the expense of the United States.³⁸ While Russia may not be conducting an overt anti-Iran or anti-Assad campaign in southern Syria, the abuses of the Assad regime and Iranian-backed forces against the local population and violations of the 2018 reconciliation agreements allow Russia to expand their footprint by leveraging the growing discontent with the Iranian and regime presence. The Russian effort to address disputes over detainees is likely an indirect attempt to undermine the Iranian and regime presence, as detainees are one of the main points of dispute between the local populace and those forces.

Should Awdeh succeed in his plan to create the new Horan Army and unify the local Dera'a Central Committees, he will substantially alter the balance of power in Dera'a Province and all of southern Syria. Other local movements in areas with strong anti-Assad and anti-Iran sentiment, such as the Druze population in Suwayda, may look to Russia for support in launching similar campaigns to expand their influence, or may even attempt to do so unilaterally. Russia is unlikely to allow Awdeh to operate independent of its goals and command of the 5th Corps in southern Syria. Awdeh's popularity in Dera'a Province is a key advantage in advancing Russian efforts, but it also forces Russia to walk a tight line with Awdeh, lest his personal influence outweigh Russia's ability to constrain him. Despite Russia's military dominance in 2018, it was unable to secure western Dera'a Province to the same level it did in eastern Dera'a Province as it did not gain the same support from the other opposition commanders.³⁹ Awdeh remains driven by opportunity and not loyalty, indicating Russia may try to absorb this new army as a cohesive extension of the 5th Corps in Dera'a Province. Russia, through such a course of action, would attempt to prevent the unlikely situation in where Awdeh attempts to shed the Horan Army of its Russian patronage and become a wholly independent entity, answerable to neither Moscow nor Damascus.

While Russia will likely benefit from the creation of the Horan Army, Assad and Iran will likely suffer, as a unified Russian-supported army would likely outmatch many of their forces in the region. Russia may also attempt to balance out the Iranian presence in Dera'a Province, as a possible Israeli-Iranian escalation in the region does not serve Russian interests and investments in southern Syria.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Iran and Assad could potentially attempt to mobilize and escalate kinetically in reaction to the creation of the Horan Army if they feel sufficiently threatened. Such an escalation would risk a larger unraveling of the security situation in the south. A mobilization of Iranian-backed forces could draw a response from Israel given the proximity of the contested areas in Syria to the Golan Heights, risking the potential for a larger regional escalation. Regardless of the long-term relationship between Russia and the Horan Army; Russia remains committed to a presence in the region for the foreseeable future. The events of late June demonstrate that Russia likely anticipates its presence growing rather than shrinking.

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¹⁰ [“Gathered Bulletin on Sunday for All Field and Military Events in Syria 21-06-2020,”] *Shaam News Network*, June 22, 2020, www.shaam.org/news/bulletins/-06-21-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B6%D8%A9.

¹¹ [“Demonstration Calling for the Overthrow of the Regime and the Release of Detainees in Dera’a,”] *Halab Today TV*, June 29, 2020, [https://halabtodaytv\(.\)net/archives/148284](https://halabtodaytv(.)net/archives/148284); [“With Chants of Overthrowing Assad.. A Funeral for the 5th Corps in Dera’a,”] *Horan Free League*, June 28, 2020, [https://www.horanfree\(.\)com/?p=6171](https://www.horanfree(.)com/?p=6171); [“Evening Demonstrations in Tafas and al-Sahwah Demand the Departure of Assad and Iran,”] *Baladi News*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/articles/62258/مظاهرات-مسائية-في-طفس-والسهوة-تطالب-برحيل-الأسد-وإيران>.

¹² [“Video | Russian-Backed Al-Awda and One of the Most Prominent Figure of Reconciliation with Regime in Daraa Talks about Formation of ‘Army of Horan’ Soon in Southern Syria,”] *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/171420/>; [“Ahmed al-Awdeh Talks about the Formation of the ‘Horan Army’ Soon (Video),”] *Enab Baladi*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/395828>; [“Ahmed al-Awda..Russia’s Spoiled Boy to Form ‘an Army’ Southern Syria,”] *Enab Baladi*, June 27, 2020, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/06/ahmed-al-awda-russias-spoiled-boy-to-form-an-army-southern-syria/>; [“Soon a United Army in Dera’a!”] *Horan Free League*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.horanfree.com/?p=6066>.

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¹⁴ Abdullah al-Jabassini, “Rampant Violence, Military Escalation, and the Role of Intermediaries in Daraa, Syria,” *Middle East Institute*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rampant-violence-military-escalation-and-role-intermediaries-daraa-syria/>; [“Ahmed al-Awda..Russia’s Spoiled Boy to Form ‘an Army’ Southern Syria,”] *Enab Baladi*, June 27, 2020, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/06/ahmed-al-awda-russias-spoiled-boy-to-form-an-army-southern-syria/>; [“Ahmed al-Awdeh Announces the Formation of an Army to Protect Horan ... Find out the Details,”] *Halab Today TV*, June 26, 2020, [https://halabtodaytv\(.\)net/archives/147924](https://halabtodaytv(.)net/archives/147924).

¹⁵ [“Shabab Al Sunna Forces Accept Russian Conditions Separately and Join Fifth Corps,”] *Nedaa Souriya*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.nedaa-sy.com/en/news/7047>; Tom Rollins, “FSA Faction Accused of Torture and Murder in Southern Syria,” *Middle East Eye*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/fsa-faction-accused-torture-and-murder-southern-syria/>; [“21 Military Formations Merged in Dera’a under the Name of the Sunni Youth Forces,”] *El Dorar*, August 22, 2016, [https://eldorar\(.\)com/node/102049](https://eldorar(.)com/node/102049).

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