

# SACD Briefing

July 2019

Reconciling with death,  
disappearance and fear

## Reconciling with death, disappearance and fear

Hundreds of Syrians forced to “reconcile” with Assad’s regime under Russian guarantees have been killed or disappeared in a systemic campaign of arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearances and forced recruitment as cannon fodder in the ongoing fighting in the north of Syria.

Since 2016, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, with the help of its Russian and Iranian allies, has employed indiscriminate attacks and siege warfare to negotiate surrender of several areas formerly held by the opposition forces. Many of these negotiated surrenders have included so called “[reconciliation deals](#)” mostly offered to people formerly affiliated with the opposition forces, but in some cases to the entire population who chose to stay after the area was retaken by the regime. These “reconciliation deals,” whose implementation was supposed to be guaranteed by Russia, nominally envisaged that those who stayed in the areas retaken by the regime would, in exchange for detailed “confession” of their affiliation with the opposition forces, have their rights restored, be free from persecution, harassment and, importantly, from the forced recruitment into Assad’s forces for at least six months. The regime’s propaganda has hailed these agreements as a model for return of the displaced Syrians, often tricking some of those most desperate, living in the increasingly difficult conditions of displacement, to return.

Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity has repeatedly warned that the “guarantees” given under “reconciliation deals” are worthless and that people in these areas are facing daily threats, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and death. A comprehensive report resulting from months of research by the SACD’s Data Collection and Analysis Unit conducted in these areas will be published in the coming weeks. The research shows that one of the greatest sources of danger and fears facing people in “reconciliation areas” is that of forced recruitment into Assad’s military.

### Frontline executions

Numerous reports and testimonies speak of the widespread practice in which the people who have entered “reconciliation agreements” and their families, are at the same time wanted by the security branches for being “connected

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to anti-regime elements” and by the military for deployment to the most dangerous frontlines in Idlib and Hama regions. Once they are recruited, they are immediately shipped to these frontlines where they often die at the hands of their former comrades or in murky circumstances away from the frontline itself. Forced recruitment has become a way for the regime to obliterate what it sees as anti-regime elements standing in the way of its vision of demographically engineering a loyal and obedient population. Examples testifying to this method of retaliation against the people who “reconciled” are numerous.

In one such incident which took place between 20-22 May, according to SACD sources, approximately 100-120 forcefully recruited soldiers who were conscripted into the regime forces after going through the so called “reconciliation” process under Russian grantees were killed in a massacre carried out by regime loyalist forces near north Hama. The motive for the massacre was their alleged intention to escape the frontline. Despite the intensive effort by the regime to cover up the massacre, SACD managed to get the names of a number of those killed, such as Nidal Al-Azzam from Dara’a, Nawaf Faisal Al-Saleh and Muhammad Al-Bashan from Hama and Hisham Al-Houri, from Kanakir, in rural Damascus.

In the week of 12-18 June, in areas of Wadi Outhman, Hamamiat, and Tal Milih, scores of other forcefully recruited young Syrians who went through the reconciliation process or returned to their homes from displacement, were killed in murky circumstances. It is not entirely clear whether they died during the fighting or were executed by the regime forces while trying to defect. SACD was able to confirm that among those killed were Mohammed Abdullah Naji, Hamza Swis and Mohammad Bidiwi, from Talbisi in Homs province, Adnan Hasan Al-Masri, from Damascus province, Daa Al-Suwei, from Taldo, Homs province, and Hammoud Ahmad Al-Hourani, from Al-Houla, Homs province.

Local activists reported that since the start of the most recent attack on Idlib and northern Hama, some [ninety young men](#) recruited to Assad’s forces from the “reconciliation” areas of Zabadani, Ghouta al-Sharqiya, Qalamoun east and west, Darya and Ghouta al-Gharbia were killed at the hands of their former brothers-in-arms who left these areas less than a year ago. They are joined by young people from northern Homs countryside whose deaths in the recent months were documented by their families. Tens of “reconciled” youth

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from Rastan were among some 150 men from Assad's forces killed in May in a [single battle](#) in northern Hama frontline.

The battle was in fact a wholesale slaughter of ill-prepared "reconciled" youth who were thrown forward as cannon fodder by their commanders to face a ferocious counter-attack by the opposition forces at KaferNpoda in northern Hama. The regime army had taken the town in the middle of the day on 22 May, and when the following night the counter-attack started, the regime officers simply threw the newly arrived "reconciliation elements" to face the fire of their old friends and relatives. The hospital in Hama reported that most of those killed were the youth from Dara'a, northern Homs and Damascus countryside. This event pushed people of Dara'a people to come out in the largest demonstrations since 2011 against forced recruitment of their young people.

The regime refuses to release names of the killed youth at the Idlib and Hama frontlines, but we were able to confirm that they included Bashar Adnan al-Ali, Omran Bakour, Hamza Sweis, Mohammed Bedewi, Mohammed Abdullah Naji, Zia al-Suwayie, Muhammad Ahmad al-Hourani, Maher al-Lattouf, Mustafa al-Saleh, Muhammad Fingan, Muhammad al-Yeihya, Diaa al-Marwan, Suleiman al-Saraqbi and tens of others who were all in the "Brigades of Tawhid"; or Anas al-Jazzar, Muhammed Mahmoud al-Marrar, Khalid Muhammed Muharib, Tariq Ahmad Zubiyah, Wael Fayez Nabulsi and dozens of others who first served with the "Free Syrian Army," fighting for the revolution, then choosing to stay and "reconcile" and ultimately ending up recruited by the regime.

The heartbreaking tragedy of their deaths is compounded by the fact that they were pushed to death at the hands of their former comrades, now forced to kill each other. Most of the opposition fighters who fought in the 22 May battle in KaferNpoda, for example, were in fact from areas of northern Homs who refused to reconcile with the regime and preferred to leave in the displacement buses to the north of Syria through a Russian agreement.

'Muhammad al-Abdullah,' a former lieutenant of the regime's army from the northern countryside of Homs, defected to the opposition forces and left with the displaced people after rejecting the settlement with the regime. He is currently fighting in the countryside of northern Hama. "I know most of the people I am fighting against these days. Almost all of them have "reconciled," some of them are from my own city, some are even my relatives. If I saw

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somebody I know, I am not sure how I would react, I might hesitate to shoot him.”

Tariq, a 27-year-old from Homs, who currently lives in the north of Syria, was left numb at the news of the death of one of his childhood friends in the battles of Hama countryside, who opted to “reconcile” and stay: “He was hesitant, he could not decide whether to go with us or not ... and then his neighbors convinced him that Russia would guarantee the agreement.”

The moral and existential dilemmas imposed on the people from these areas are titanic and heartbreaking. Some activists blame the young people who signed the reconciliation agreements for having chosen to settle with the regime in order to stay in their homes. Others sympathize with them, knowing the difficult circumstances they suffered and the almost certain prospect of enforced disappearance if they fail to report when they are wanted for recruitment. Caught between a rock of forced recruitment and a hard place of arrest by Assad’s security if they refuse to report, the outcome for many is dire, regardless of the choice they make.

It is clear from the provenance of all the victims documented by SACD that they came from areas that went through the reconciliation process not long ago. The testimonies of their relatives and close friends, and the profile of the victims and their trajectory during the last few years, clearly show that some of them used to fight with the armed opposition, while others just returned to regime-held areas lured by regime propaganda and Russian promises of safety, unfortunately sometimes amplified in the narratives of some international organisations working on Syria.

## Deadly Russian guarantees

Russian guarantees, which were the decisive factor to convince many of those who stayed in areas covered by the “reconciliation agreements,” are now literally claiming lives. There are a number of cases of men from “reconciliation areas” who refused to join the military service - relying on the Russian guarantees that they will not be forced to Assad’s army for at least six months after the agreements were signed - being arrested, disappeared and killed by the regime’s security forces. At the beginning of March 2019, in the countryside of Homs [Ibrahim Obaid](#), Tariq Zakur and Mohammad Tariyah,

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were all killed and their bodies were sent to their families, after they were arrested for refusing to be recruited less than three months after the start of the reconciliation agreement secured by Russia. Dozens of other people from the northern countryside of Homs who signed up for the settlement and refused to report to the army on the basis of Russian guarantees were detained and are still in Assad's prisons, their fate unknown.

The situation of the northern Homs countryside is not unique, as the people of eastern Ghouta received 4000 summoning reports ordering them to report to the units to perform the military [service immediately](#) after the "reconciliations." This summons were issued despite the explicit provision in the agreement that gives those who stay a period of six months before they can be called upon to join the military service. Large number of young people who remained in eastern Ghouta opted to [obey the orders](#) to avoid the arrests that began to take place against some who refused to report.

Daraa's various cities and villages are also subjected to dozens of cases of forced recruitment and detention that are all in violation of what has been agreed upon between the areas that have been reconciled on the one hand and the Russians and the regime on the other. The regime's security forces in Daraa are apprehending people who have "settlement cards" every day. The Ahrar Houran group has documented 683 cases [of arrests](#) since the agreement was signed in July 2018.

Most of those people have already conducted the settlement and reconciliation process with the regime. Just in June, Abdul Hamid Abdul Razzaq al-Zu'bi and Saeed Yousef al-Saeed were arrested as they passed al-Tablein checkpoint on the 'Tasil al-Bakkar' road in the western countryside of Daraa, while Khaled Kayed al-Shakran was arrested at a checkpoint in the town of Ma'areba. They were all arrested despite carrying "settlement cards."

Once these arrests happen, no one knows the fate of those arrested. Some end up dead and their bodies returned to the families with clear signs of torture, such as Ahmed Hamdi Keshkoush from Dara'a. His body was handed over to his family at the beginning of June after nearly nine months since he was arrested.

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## Choosing to flee

The only option for the vast majority of youth from “reconciliation areas” is to flee. To Lebanon, north of Syria or anywhere else where they will have a chance of surviving. But, with the Russian assault on Idlib intensifying, and anti-refugee sentiment in Lebanon and Turkey on the rise, they are finding their prospects of reaching safety dwindling.

On June 20, the Lebanese General Security handed over the activist Osman Taha to the Syrian intelligence after he illegally entered Lebanon a few months ago. Taha had accepted a “Personal Status Settlement” (PSS) with the regime in May 2018 within the broader “reconciliation agreement” entered by his the town of Rastan in northern Homs under the Russian guarantees. He fled to Lebanon after he found out he was wanted for military service, as part of the recruitment drive targeting the young people in the “reconciliation areas” to be [sent to fight](#) the opposition forces.

The northern areas of Homs came into reconciliation with the regime in May 2018, with a large number of young people remaining in the area. However, one month after the “reconciliation agreement” (despite the Russian guarantees that they would be free of recruitment for at least six months), the regime forcibly recruited all the people affiliated with the “Free Syrian Army” to fight in the eastern Homs countryside. When this happened, a whole group of them was sent into an ambush set by the Daesh, with tens of the forcibly recruited people who entered PSS agreements dying in the ambush.

A few months later, the former leader of the ‘Tawhid Army’, an FSA-affiliated faction, Manhal al-Salouh, was [arrested](#) by the regime’s security along with the head of the local opposition council in the town of Talbeisa (10 KM to the north of Homs), Osama Saad Eddin Jokhdar, as well as some of the elders from the region who had helped earlier with the “reconciliation process,” most notably Nasser Al-Kahm. There were no explanations on what charges they were arrested, nor are their whereabouts known. These arrests took place about ten days after the arrest of ‘Al-Dahheik’, who was released in exchange for bringing in more youth from “reconciliation areas” to be sent to the frontline.

The threats of death at the frontline or disappearance by Assad’s security led Osman Taha and dozens of other young people to search for a way out from

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the “reconciled areas” of northern Homs to the northern regions or Lebanon. What was supposed to be a model for return of the vast numbers of displaced Syrians has now become yet another driver of displacement.

After almost a year since the last reconciliation agreement was concluded, we can clearly see that Assad’s regime was able to benefit from the youth who remained in “reconciliation areas” by forcibly recruiting them and deploying them on the most violent frontlines. The most energetic part of the population in areas which could have provided some sort of resistance to his policies is effectively being obliterated in this way. At the same time, the regime’s security forces continue to arrest and kill persons from these areas whom it regards as a direct threat to its power. Such arrests and killings are being carried out in direct contravention of the terms of the agreements, which Russia had guaranteed, and testify to the retaliatory policies of the regime targeting anyone formerly affiliated with the opposition.

“Reconciliation agreements” areas are today among the most unsafe territories in Assad’s [failed state](#). Arrests, enforced disappearance and forced recruitment which often amounts to a death sentence are a daily occurrence. Far from being a model for return of millions of displaced Syrians, they provide for a warning to the international community that any solution which will bring a hope of a lasting peace in Syria must include a robust international mechanism to monitor and ensure the rights of all Syrians, and particularly those who were already on the receiving end of Assad’s criminal conduct.

*Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity is a movement established by the people of Syria for the people of Syria. It has no political affiliation. Through policy advice, advocacy and dialogue, it works to promote and secure the rights of refugees and IDPs from Syria, representing their views and concerns to get their voices heard. It embodies the diversity of the country’s population, regardless of social class, gender or religious confession. It fights against premature or forced return. It considers that a movement for dignified return, based on recognition of the rights of the displaced citizens of Syria, is central to any efforts to end the conflict and assist in Syria’s recovery.*