

Large-scale forced population transfers in Syria: details of the recent "four towns agreement"

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News

In Syria, busses escorted by white jeeps of the Syrian Red Crescent and the United Nations have become a frequent sight accompanied by the news about forced large-scale population transfers. The most recent agreement consists of extremely complex choreographed cascading movements in the Middle East, involving massive forced displacement-swaps of four besieged towns in Syria, the release of detainees from Assad-regime detention and the release of a group of kidnapped Qataris in Iraq.

Summary

In my contribution, I will analyze three major components of this agreement involving negotiations with a variety of state and non-state actors in the Middle East and the Gulf, including Shiite and Sunni US-designated terrorist groups.

Key Words

Syria, Qatar, Iraq, Iran, humanitarian aid, UN

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Analysis:

1. The instrumentalization of confessional sieges for the weaponization of humanitarian aid

In a recent development, the fates of the four towns Madaya and Zabadani on one side and Fua and Kafraya on the other have been intimately tied together in an agreement pushed for by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) in September 2016. Zabadani and Madaya are rebel-held villages in rural Damascus and besieged by a mixture of Syrian Armed Forces, Lebanese Hizballah, Shiite Jihadis from Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. Fua and Kafraya are predominantly Shiite enclaves in the rebel-held Idlib province, that were encircled in March 2015 by a coalition of armed radical Sunni groups,¹ from which the Qaida inspired coalition *Hai'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) emerged.² In September 2015, a mutual ceasefire and "Four Towns Agreement" were announced for Zabadani and Madaya in exchange for the rebels surrounding Fua and Kafraya stopping their assault.³

This agreement exacerbated an already asymmetric aid distribution and medical evacuation logic of the Damascus-based humanitarian aid industry⁴, namely the United Nations including WHO, WFP, UNHCR, OCHA, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.⁵

It favors a small number of Shiite enclaves besieged by rebels in a disproportionate manner in exchange for the same or less amount of humanitarian aid to rebel-held besieged areas surrounded by the Asad-regime coalition. While Shiite enclaves were

¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusra Front, allies strike 2 Shiite towns in Idlib province," *Threat Matrix: A Blog of the Long War Journal* 18.9.2015. Online: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/al-nusrah-front-allies-strike-2-shiite-towns-in-idlib-province.php> (consulted 17.4.2017).

² Emma Beals, "Syria's Cruel 'Reconciliations'", *The Daily Beast* 21.4.2017. Online: http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/04/21/syria-s-cruel-reconciliations.html?via=twitter_page (consulted 21.4.2017).

³ International Crisis Group, *Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*. Brussels: ICG, 2017, pp. 8-9.

⁴ UN/INGOs function like for-profit international business companies, which possess the know-how, design the project, control access to investors and markets, while their local "business partners" deliver cheap labor and low production costs. They hire local staff and staff through implementation partners, who work for considerably less than the expatriates, but take high risks on the ground. In addition, UN/INGOs need to engage in competition to keep and expand their share of the markets and budgets.

⁵ Nick Hopkins, Emma Beals, "How Assad regime controls UN aid intended for Syria's children," *Guardian* 29.8.2016. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/how-assad-regime-controls-un-aid-intended-for-syrias-children> (consulted 14.4.2017)

benefitting from bi-weekly humanitarian air drops from the Syrian regime and Russia,⁶ minimal quantities of humanitarian aid, with parts "confiscated" at Asad-regime-manned checkpoints, have been sporadically dribbling into 37 besieged areas, such as Eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus, where 913,575 residents have no access to clean water, electricity, food, medicine or medical treatment and another 1.3 million are considered to be "at risk of coming under siege".⁷

This disproportionate distribution of humanitarian aid evolved through the disequilibrium of the major representatives of the humanitarian aid industry in Syria, such as the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, all working from Asad-regime territory under tight control of the Syrian regime. With little or no space to negotiate, they have accepted to massively expand activities in Asad-regime controlled areas making food availability a key attraction for the flows of internally displaced towards these areas. At the same time rebel-controlled areas were underserved or out of reach including locations where residents were starving to death.⁸ "Cutting food supplies to rebel-held areas and channeling the bulk of humanitarian aid to government-approved zones has made the regime 'the only reliable sources of life-sustaining food'."⁹ This "surrender or die" strategy¹⁰ coupled with massive aerial bombardment with cluster munitions and incendiary bombs is forcing the population of besieged areas into agreements of massive forced population transfers, many of them to Idlib.¹¹ Usually civilian residents do not have a choice over whether to stay or to leave in a forced evacuation deal, thus amounting to a war crime of forced displacement according to the UN's Independent

⁶ ICRC, *Syria: Key Operation Begins to Bring Aid to People in Besieged Areas*. Geneva: ICRC, 12.1.2016. Online: <http://blogs.icrc.org/new-delhi/2016/01/12/syria-key-operation-begins-to-bring-aid-to-people-in-besieged-areas/> (consulted 24.4.2017); Kareem Chehayeb, "Surrender or die," *Middle East Eye* 29 December 2016. Online: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/surrender-or-die-syrias-sieges-are-difference-makers-conflict-1138482157> (consulted 17.4.2017).

⁷ The Syria Institute, PAX, *Siege Watch. Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria November 2016-January 2017*. Online: <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pax-tsi-siege-watch-5-final-r.pdf> (consulted 22.12.2016).

⁸ Adam Lichtenfeld, "Beyond Ethno-sectarian 'Cleansing': The Assortative Logic of Forced Displacement in Syria," *POMEPS* 11.4.2017. Online: <https://pomeps.org/2017/03/29/beyond-ethno-sectarian-cleansing-the-assortative-logic-of-forced-displacement-in-syria/> (consulted 22.4.2017).

⁹ Jose Ciro Martinez, Brent Eng, *Assad's Bread Problem*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 2015. Online: <http://carneigeendowment.org/sada/?fa=58941> (consulted 14.1.2017).

¹⁰ The Syria Institute, PAX, *Siege Watch. Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria November 2016-January 2017*. Online: <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pax-tsi-siege-watch-5-final-r.pdf> (retrieved 22.12.2016);

¹¹ Aron Lund, "Trapped: How northwestern Syria became a cage for hundreds of thousands of civilians," *Irin News* 28.3.2017. Online: <http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/03/28/trapped-how-northwestern-syria-became-cage-hundreds-thousands-civilians> (consulted 17.4.2017).

International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.¹² By being skillfully woven into this logic, the Damascus-based humanitarian aid industry fell into Assad's trap of confessionalizing and weaponizing humanitarian aid. In addition, the Idlib province has become "the dumping ground for irreconcilable enemies" for the Assad-regime.¹³

The forced population transfer of thousands of residents from Fua, Kafraya, Zabadani and Madaya in the coming months was brokered by the Assad regime and Iran on one side and Qatar, representing the rebels, on the other, without involvement of the United Nations. It was at first not connected to the fate of the Qatari hostages in Iraq.¹⁴ According to it, residents of Zabadani and Madaya "get safe passage" out of their besieged areas in exchange for the residents of Fua and Kafraya being transferred to Damascus.¹⁵ During the first stage of this population swap a bus loaded with humanitarian aid exploded in Rashidin in Aleppo province, an area tightly controlled by the Assad-regime, killing 126, among them 21 aid workers and rebels guarding the convoy and injuring about 500 people.¹⁶

2. Detainees in the Assad-Run Detention-and-Torture Business

Another component of this tragic choreography included the release of 1,500 detainees by the Assad-regime in exchange for the entry of humanitarian aid into Assad-regime coalition besieged areas in rural Damascus.¹⁷ This deal was negotiated between the two

¹² UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. A/HRC/31/68, 3.2.2016. Online: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A-HRC-31-68.pdf> (consulted 17.4.2017).

¹³ Aron Lund, "Trapped: How northwestern Syria became a cage for hundreds of thousands of civilians," *Irin News* 28.3.2017. Online: <http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/03/28/trapped-how-northwestern-syria-became-cage-hundreds-thousands-civilians> (consulted 17.4.2017).

¹⁴ Tim Arango, "Big Ransom and Syria Deals Win Release of Royal Qatari Hunters," *New York Times* 21 April 2017. Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/world/middleeast/big-ransom-and-syria-deals-win-release-of-royal-qatari-hunters.html?_r=1 (consulted 17.4.2017).

¹⁵ "Syrie: le Qatar et l'Iran obtiennent un accord d'évacuation de 4 localités assiégées," *AFP* 29.3.2017. Online: <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1043523/syrie-le-qatar-et-liran-obtiennent-un-accord-devacuation-de-4-localites-assiegees.html> (consulted 15.4.2017).

¹⁶ Emma Graham-Harrison, Damien Gayle, "Deadly Aleppo Suicide Attack Kills 100 in Evacuation Operation," *Guardian* 16.4.2017. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/15/syria-aleppo-bombing-evacuees-rebels-killed> (consulted 28.4.2017).

¹⁷ Anton Mardasov, "Why was the deal to evacuate Syrian town brokered by Qatar and Iran?" *Al-Monitor* 7 April 2017. Online: <http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-russia-qatar-conflict-syria-deal-turkey.html> (consulted 17.4.2017)-

Salafi rebel-factions *Fatah-Army* and *Ahrar al-Sham* on one side and Iran on the other. However, the Asad regime coalition refused to offer the names of those being released. At the same time, it was also reported that officers of the Syrian intelligence blackmailed payments from detainees' families for their names to be included in the deal. Prices for this service was as high as 2,5 million Syrian Liras. It is common for Syrian officials and prison staff involved in the detention and industrial-style torture business of the Asad-regime to request payments either directly or through brokers from detainees' relatives in exchange for a variety of services. They reach from exemption of certain torture methods to getting on the list for detainee-swaps for release. The cash flows of these payments have become an attractive source of income for the Syrian regime. Regarding this specific swap, only individuals arrested in the past three months and not involved in any opposition activities were included. Most of them had only come to regime-controlled areas to collect their salaries.¹⁸ It is quite likely that they were arrested with the intention to use them in such swaps.

3. Bird-Hunting Qataris

In the middle of these complex negotiations over the fate of starving residents and detainees, a group of pleasure-seeking Qataris and Saudis emerged. They had been kidnapped in the Muthanna governorate in southern Iraq while hunting for rare birds in mid-December 2015, allegedly by *Kata'ib Hizballah*, an Iranian-backed Shiite militia and US-designated terrorist organization.¹⁹ Negotiations of their release were said to have been added to the "Four Towns Agreement" and arranged in March 2017 in Doha, Qatar, with the HTS, the Lebanese Hizballah and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps.²⁰ According to media reports, millions of dollars were paid by the Qataris to the Shiite militias and HTS.²¹ The latter agreed to free a number of detained Lebanese fighters in

¹⁸ "The Syrian Commission for Releasing Detainees: The Opposition cannot request the names of the detainees to be released within the Four-Towns-Agreement," (in Arabic) *Souriya.net* 22 April 2017. Online: <https://www.alsouria.net/content/الهيئة-السورية-لإفك-الأسرى-المعارضة-لا-يمكنها-طلب-أسماء-معتقلين-لإفراج-عنهم-ضمن-اتفاق-المدن> (consulted 23.4.2017).

¹⁹ David Andrew Weinberg, Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Qatar's ill-timed hostage deal increases pressure on Washington," *FDD's Long War Journal* 22.4.2017. Online: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/04/analysis-qatars-ill-timed-hostage-deal-increases-pressure-on-washington.php> (consulted 24.4.2017)

²⁰ Anton Mardasov, "Why was the deal to evacuate Syrian town brokered by Qatar and Iran?" *Al-Monitor* 7 April 2017. Online: <http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-russia-qatar-conflict-syria-deal-turkey.html> (consulted 17.4.2017).

²¹ Martin Chulov, "Qatari Royal Family Members Used as Leverage in Syrian Population Swap," *Guardian* 14.4.2017. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/14/besieged-syria-towns-evacuated-as-regime-and-rebels-begin-huge-people-swap> (consulted 20.4.2017).

exchange for the release of the Qatari hostages.²² Speculations were voiced about how these deals and payments involving representatives linked to al-Qaida and alleged Shiite terrorist groups by Qatar, might affect its relations with the US administration.

4. Conclusion

The unfolding of the recent agreement involving starving residents from besieged areas in Syria, detainees in Assad-detention and bird-hunting Qataris reveals the complexity of the Syrian conflict. It has redefined "humanitarian diplomacy" as an art of conducting negotiations between representatives of state and non-state actors using humanitarian actors and services as a means to reach complex military and political goals.

In the power struggle of a brutal proxy war between state and non-state actors, human lives in Syria have become disposables, moved around, bombed, starved to death.

²² David Andrew Weinberg, Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Qatar's ill-timed hostage deal increases pressure on Washington," *FDD's Long War Journal* 22.4.2017. Online: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/04/analysis-qatars-ill-timed-hostage-deal-increases-pressure-on-washington.php> (consulted 24.4.2017).