

SYRIA ALERT XIII



Forced ceasefires: The case of Barzeh and Qaboun

June 20th, 2014

Over the few past months, the Assad regime has been negotiating ceasefires with opposition forces in several neighbourhoods and suburbs of Damascus. This Syria Alert looks into the ceasefire negotiations in Barzeh and Qaboun, on the basis of a longer forthcoming paper prepared by PAX's Syrian partner Etana¹. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was forced into these negotiations as the Assad regime starved and threatened civilians while systematically destroying their neighbourhoods. The regime was not able to get all their demands as the FSA was only willing to negotiate a ceasefire and release of prisoners. The regime's claims of victory contradict the facts on the ground, because in reality, the Assad regime did not regain control inside the neighbourhoods, but rather had only control of certain points on the outskirts and made it appear as if they had regained control.

- This Syria Alert concludes that the ceasefires between the Assad regime and FSA are temporary, tactical agreements as part of a military strategy and have nothing to do with political agreements. This underscores the urgency for the international community to genuinely search for a new political framework to address the conflict, after the failure of the Geneva 2 talks.
- Secondly, the case of Barzeh and Qaboun illustrates how the Assad regime has misrepresented the ceasefires in its public relations for Geneva 2 and the presidential elections, purporting it had gained control of certain neighbourhoods, when in fact it only gained control of some key strategic points.
- Third, the Assad regime has only been able to partly neutralize the FSA through a set of war crimes, including but not limited to starvation, bombardment of populated areas, and systematic destruction. Those responsible for these war crimes must be held accountable.
- Finally, it is clear that the international community's pressure to secure the roads to the coast to remove the chemical weapons contributed to the regime's focus on Barzeh and Qaboun and the northern exit road of Damascus (the highway to Homs).

ARE THE CEASEFIRES A STEP TOWARDS PEACE OR A NEGOTIATED SURRENDER?

In a *Der Spiegel* interview with Lakhdar Brahimi after his resignation as UN Special Envoy, he said about the ceasefire in Homs, "The government starved the people there into surrender. The negotiation in Homs took place within the war project of the government, and it led to a victory by the government."² The European Union used similar language, when in April the Conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council referred to the ceasefires as "negotiated surrender".

While the ceasefires are welcomed by some peace activists as a possible model for bottom-up peace building, it is difficult to conduct a proper assessment due to the limited information about how these ceasefire negotiations went. By looking into more detail into the negotiations over Barzeh and Qaboun, two neighborhoods in the North-East of Damascus, this Syria Alert will expose some patterns that should be taken into account for the development of future steps to address the conflict.

The cases of Barzeh and Qaboun illustrate that through the regime's use of sieges and other violations of international humanitarian law, the FSA was left with no other option than to negotiate a ceasefire in order to save civilian lives. The Assad regime's interests and interests of the armed opposition groups met at the issue of a ceasefire, each having their own reasons to agree. There was no element of peacebuilding or political reconciliation. None of the sides offered anything else but to stop fighting, as both needed this – Assad to make military gains and the FSA to prevent further loss of civilian lives. What distinguishes this ceasefire is that the FSA was aware of its strengths and was therefore able to limit the negotiations to only their priorities: A ceasefire and release of the prisoners

¹ The paper will be published in English and Arabic as an Etana File on www.etanasyria.org. Another paper on the ceasefire in Homs is forthcoming.

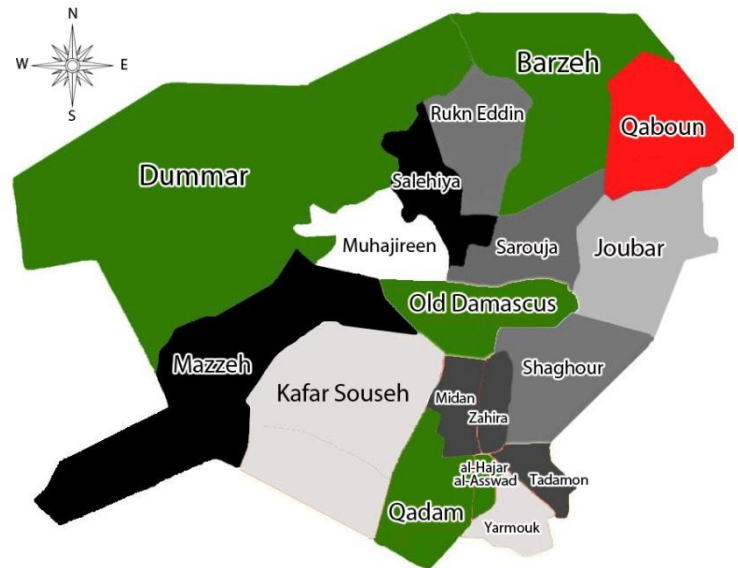
² <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-former-un-peace-envoy-to-syria-lakhdar-brahimi-a-974036.html>

from Qaboun and Barzeh in regime detention. The FSA leaders were also aware that this was a temporary situation and that they would no longer be able to keep the ceasefire if the regime would use it to retake control.

BARZEH AND QABOUN, STRATEGICALLY LOCATED REVOLTING NEIGHBORHOODS

Barzeh and Qaboun are important for the regime because of their elevated location on the northeastern side of Damascus. The northern exit road from Damascus goes through this area. Barzeh and Qaboun were amongst the first neighborhoods in Damascus where protests took place, beginning 25 March 2011. A turning point for Qaboun was the Asraa' al-Hurriyyeh Friday (15 July 2011), when 14 people were killed and hundreds injured by regime shooting during a peaceful protest. Three days later, 90 people were killed when peaceful demonstrators protected by the FSA came together from different directions at Abbasiyeen square, following heavy shelling of Qaboun by the regime. This was the moment when the FSA became openly present.

Barzeh turned against the regime when the regime shot four people dead during peaceful protests on Good Friday (22 April 2011). At the end of April 2011, clashes took place between the local police and peaceful protesters. In the two following months, May and June, the regime conducted a wide military operation in Barzeh. Then, armed opposition groups became openly present and many people fled the neighborhood. At the end of July, the regime conducted another door-to-door search of the area in which it killed a number of local figures, including "Barzeh's Qashoush"³ Ahed al-Masri.



THE SIEGE

Barzeh and Qaboun began to cooperate militarily through the establishment of the Badr Brigade, which developed into the Liwaa' al-Awwal (First Brigade), part of the FSA. The FSA was able to provide services to the neighbourhoods, such as the establishment of a police force, a court and civil defence. As most of the fighters were members of the local community, they were well integrated. On 20 May 2012, after the FSA had taken control of the area, the regime undertook its siege of Qaboun. By that time, the neighbourhood had been emptied of most of its inhabitants through the heavy bombardments that had been ongoing since July 2011. After the siege was imposed, the Assad regime systematically destroyed the residential areas, from the east to the south, to the north back to the east, and secured the main exit road from Damascus to the north. The regime destroyed the main services, such as electricity and water networks. Qaboun was subjected to constant shelling, checkpoints were set up controlling the access roads to the neighbourhood, and snipers and armed groups linked to the regime were placed with heavy weapons around the neighbourhood. The regime also employed artillery shelling, surface-to-surface missiles, and air strikes. In the month of November 2012 alone, 220 air strikes were launched on the neighbourhood.⁴

A partial siege of Barzeh began on 10 March 2013 when regime forces surrounded the neighbourhood and closed off the main access road. During the partial siege of Barzeh, around 80% of the inhabitants fled the area, which was under heavy attack from artillery shelling and surface-to-surface missiles (an activist documented 20 missile attacks in four days between 26 and 30 April 2013)⁵. This caused wide destruction, including services such as hospitals and clinics. The neighbourhood was fully sealed off by Autumn 2013. What pulled the remaining residents through the winter of 2013/2014 was the strong social cohesion of the neighbourhood, in which many of the residents are relatives. Barzeh has

³ Ibrahim Qashoush was the famous protest singer from Hama whose song "Irrhal Ya Bashar" became one of the key songs of the revolution. The regime killed him by cutting his throat cut and throwing him in the river Orontes.

⁴ According to local resource persons interviewed by Etana.

⁵ According to local resource persons interviewed by Etana.

strategic importance for the regime as it is in the northeastern corner of the city and an access point to Eastern Ghouta to the east and Qalamoun to the north, which at that time were both under FSA control. The area also contains institutions that are strategically important for the regime, including Tishreen military hospital, Security Branch 211, the Center for Scientific Studies, and the leadership of the military police.

The regime realised that its weak point in defending Damascus was that the FSA had been able to control elevated areas and thus take the city centre under fire. Therefore, these areas were identified as a priority. The regime wanted to make sure that especially Barzeh would not become part of the FSA-controlled areas to the east of the city.

NO CHOICE BUT NEGOTIATIONS

The ceasefire negotiations of Barzeh and Qaboun were connected and were the result of the enormous dilemma the FSA leaders were confronted with: Negotiations or systematic destruction of civilian lives. A first introductory meeting between representatives of the regime and Barzeh and Qaboun was held in the office of a military security officer 45 days before the Geneva 2 negotiations, and included a former FSA leader from Barzeh, the father of a defected soldier from the neighbourhood, and a number of representatives of the neighbourhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun. It should be noted that this meeting was preceded by the regime forces' discovery and destruction of a tunnel under the highway that served to deliver supplies to Barzeh and Qaboun while the area was under siege. The leadership of the Liwaa' al-Awwal searched for ways to make Barzeh persevere until after Geneva 2, so as not to let the regime have any political gains at the negotiations. However, this became impossible due to a lack of ammunition; the Liwaa' al-Awwal could not hold out that long.

Members of the regime delegation to the ceasefire negotiations were not chosen on the basis of their ability to build trust with the neighbourhood, but because they were part of the regime's inner circle, connected through business and friendship. The regime delegation carried a letter with eight conditions: 1. A ceasefire; 2. Neutralizing all fighters; 3. The FSA to submit its heavy weapons; 4. Opening the main road (highway) and putting it fully under regime control; 5. Compensation for those affected by the military operations and beginning reconstruction; 6. Filming the signing of the agreement inside Barzeh for state television; 7. Raising the regime flag on an elevated place in Barzeh; and 8. Offering 20 million Syrian pounds per month to Liwaa' al-Awwal on the condition that they do not use it to buy weapons or ammunition.

The Liwaa' al-Awwal completely rejected these conditions. When the regime delegation reported this rejection to the colonel in the Republican Guard responsible for the negotiations, the regime responded with threats suggesting that the people from Barzeh and Qaboun residing in regime-controlled areas were considered to be hostages. In reaction to the regime's threat of holding people hostage, the Liwaa' al-Awwal identified a two-step process. The first step consisted of two basic conditions: 1. A ceasefire; and 2. The release of all prisoners from Barzeh and Qaboun. Only after the full implementation of these conditions would the Liwaa' al-Awwal be ready to negotiate over further conditions.

The regime agreed with this separation of conditions, and a ceasefire began on 6 January 2014. However, the regime released only 70 prisoners, some of them revolutionary activists, and refused to release women. The regime also set up a checkpoint 50 metres away from a checkpoint controlled by the FSA. The Liwaa' al-Awwal ordered the other FSA groups not to attack the regime checkpoint. In return, the road to Tishreen hospital was opened under control of FSA checkpoints. The regime television portrayed the situation completely differently, broadcasting footage of the removal of road blocks outside Barzeh as if it were inside Barzeh and part of a "reconciliation agreement". There was no element of reconciliation in this process.

RESULTS OF THE CEASEFIRE IN BARZEH AND QABOUN

The results of the ceasefire negotiations in Barzeh and Qaboun can be summarised as follows: Under the threat of fire and of the killing of hostages, the regime was able to partly neutralize Barzeh and Qaboun militarily. It could claim this as a political victory in the prelude to Geneva 2 and later use it to make it seem like the presidential elections could take place in a stable atmosphere. Through the media, the regime presented the situation as if it retook control of the areas, whereas in reality the regime only had checkpoints and military presence outside the neighbourhoods.

The regime could secure the road to Qalamoun in preparation of the battle for that region. The Barzeh/Qaboun ceasefire opened the way for a ceasefire in Harasta, thus securing the northern exit road of Damascus. The regime was thus able to meet the international pressure to secure the exit route for the chemical weapons from Damascus via Homs to Tartous.

The limited options for the Liwaa' al-Awwal and their lack of ammunition left them left them with the choice between saving civilian lives or sacrificing them. When the Liwaa' al-Awwal agreed to the ceasefire to protect civilians, the Islamic factions in the Eastern Ghouta launched a media campaign against the leader of the Liwaa' al-Awwal, accusing him of collaboration with the regime and aiming at strengthening their own influence in those neighbourhoods.

The political wins that the regime claimed required a changed military strategy, mainly based on quick regime operations from severed bases in uninhabited areas. Simultaneously controlling access roads became more of a priority for the FSA, rather than being stuck in severed islands. Another priority became to contain conflicts of interest between the different opposition factions.

A unique characteristic of this truce compared to other ceasefires in Damascus, was the separation of conditions into two sets in order to secure the basic needs of the population under siege but not give in to all regime demands.

The regime's political and operational gains in the areas with a ceasefire are only temporary. It is likely that in a second stage the regime will try to remove all weapons and the FSA from these areas to get back to a situation of direct occupation and to remove the entire opposition movement through door-to-door searches. After the ceasefire was announced, the Assad regime continued to arrest people in Barzeh and Qaboun.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The ceasefires between the Assad regime and FSA are temporary, tactical agreements that have nothing to do with political agreements. Therefore, they should not be seen as a model to build peace. They are at best a means to relieve civilians, but could also be a step towards a regime effort to retake full control ultimately putting civilians under more threat; this underlines the urgency for the international community to genuinely search for a new political framework to address the conflict, after the failure of the Geneva 2 talks.
2. As in the other neighbourhoods where ceasefire negotiations were held, the Assad regime has been able to partly neutralize the FSA in Barzeh and Qaboun through a policy based on violations of international humanitarian law, including sieges, the use of starvation as a weapon, and systematic destruction through bombardments. In other areas such as Darayya and Moadhamiyeh, barrel bombs were also used to force the FSA into negotiations, by leaving them only two options: Negotiations or sacrificing civilians. The ceasefires thus were the result of a campaign of war crimes and those responsible should be held accountable.
3. The Assad regime presented the ceasefires as a victory in its public relations leading up to Geneva 2 and the presidential elections, whereas in the case of Barzeh and Qaboun, they only gained control of some key strategic points outside the neighbourhoods but did not regain control inside neighbourhoods.
4. The international community's pressure to secure the roads to the coast to remove the chemical weapons contributed to the dynamics in which the regime wanted to negotiate ceasefires and launched military offensives.

Syria Alert is a policy letter published by the Dutch peace movement PAX, formerly known as IKV Pax Christi

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