



Research Summary Report: Local Truces in Syria

June 2014

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Summary

Integrity's research highlights that the truces agreed in several locations across Syria in the early months of 2014 do not represent the localised beginnings of a peacebuilding process. These agreements—and the negotiation and implementation processes that delivered them—were not built upon good practice and were significantly undermined by a lack of political will for peace from the outset.

For opposition stakeholders, the truce agreements were a reaction to extreme levels of civilian suffering and a military capacity weakened by lengthy, government-enforced sieges. In all areas researched, Integrity's respondents reported high levels of starvation, with particularly severe levels of malnutrition in the cases of Yarmouk and Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham.

Evidence suggests that these truces were part of a government strategy to retake besieged areas and force opposition surrender through the exploitation of dire humanitarian needs. The forced return of IDPs by the government to besieged areas such as in Barzeh or the confiscation of aid underscores this exploitation. The government's presentation of these truces as evidence of national reconciliation efforts also appears designed to bolster resistance to third party involvement in the conflict or in its mediation.

Research further demonstrates that truce terms were vague, contested or verbal only; were not signed by both parties; and generally did not specify coordination and implementation modalities or agreed roles and responsibilities for stakeholders. As a result, truces were prone to abuse and violations in the form of attacks by government paramilitary forces such as the National Defence Force (NDF) and the confiscation or theft of humanitarian aid agreed upon in negotiations.

The truces resulted in only a minimal and temporary improvement of the humanitarian situation in affected communities. Evidence suggests that food aid delivered was almost always significantly insufficient for civilian needs and that very little medical aid reached besieged areas. Integrity's research suggests that as a result of this limited humanitarian impact, the difficult negotiation processes and multiple term violations, the truces appear to have increased levels of mistrust and uncertainty among parties and have served to further entrench already-polarised positions.

In addition, actions on both sides point to a marked absence of political will for meaningful peace negotiations. Without a significant change in the level of this political will, Integrity's research suggests that these truces are highly unlikely to be sustainable or able to contribute to the beginnings of a peace process.

Objectives of this report

This research summary report provides a brief overview of the localised truce negotiations and agreements that have taken place in various locations of Syria. It draws on material from a longer qualitative research report prepared by Integrity in April 2014. Interviewees for this research were identified using a snowball sample and were largely based in the areas around Rif Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, as well as a limited number from elsewhere in Syria and neighbouring countries. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with 25 research participants including activists, civil society members, representatives from armed opposition groups (AOGs), local governance organisations, a representative from the Syrian Ministry of Reconciliation and humanitarian workers involved in deliveries in truce areas. In addition to interviews, Integrity analysed internal truce documents provided to our researchers by involved participants such as term agreement documents, violation reports and humanitarian impact reports. Integrity notes that the data included in this summary report was current at the time of original publication but given the fluidity of the conflict in Syria, may now have changed. For briefings or more information on this report, please contact Integrity at this email address: syria@integrityresearch.com.

Context: The Syrian peace process, ceasefire theory and local truces

The Syrian uprising is now in its fourth year and there appears to be little likelihood of a peace settlement in the short or medium term. Neither the government nor the various elements of the fragmented opposition appear willing or able to take productive steps toward a peace process. Progress on Track I efforts, focused most recently on the Geneva II conference in January 2014, has been limited and was described by a senior United States Department of State official as ‘stalled.’¹ The failure of formal peace negotiations at Geneva, a government presently emboldened by successful military campaigns in some areas and a divided opposition point to an absence of political will for peace.² This makes meaningful progress toward such a peace process highly unlikely. Within this context, the local truces³

¹ US Department of State, *Geneva II Process and the Overall Situation in Syria*, January 2014.

² In referring to ‘political will’ this report draws upon concepts in peace process literature such as ‘ripeness’ for peace or the existence of a ‘mutually hurting statement’ which identify necessary peace-enabling conditions. See, William Zartman, “[The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments](#)”, *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 2001, p 8.

³ This report uses ‘truce’ to refer to a temporary cessation of hostilities. Common features of current truce agreements in Syria include a brief cessation of violence, the delivery of humanitarian aid, detainee releases and, in some cases, the mutual manning of check-points. In labeling these

analysed in this report are unrelated to any broader peace process and political will that might help facilitate them.

The diverse body of theory and practice on ceasefires, peace processes and truces points to the critical importance of political will for success and sustainability. In analysing the local truces currently in place or under negotiation in Syria, this report uses an analytic framework based upon a combination of approaches to ceasefires and peace building⁴ and uses what Virginia Page Fortna refers to as three critical elements necessary for successful ceasefires:

- Raising the costs of future attacks: the cost of renewed conflict must outweigh the incentives to attack;
- Reducing uncertainty: both sides must be reassured about the other's actions and intentions;
- Mechanisms must be in place to keep accidents or skirmishes from escalating.⁵

In the last few months of 2013 and in early 2014, negotiations began to take place over localised truces, most commonly, although not exclusively, in besieged areas. Research conducted by Integrity for this report has identified 26 local truces reaching from Qamishli to Latakia, as well as several in the areas surrounding Damascus. This report focuses on truces in areas besieged by government forces, which were among the most recent agreements at the time of research and publication. However, the agreements covered in this report do not represent the totality of truces in Syria at present. One respondent indicated that there are dozens of further truces under negotiation or in place across Syria, which have not been publicised due to security concerns for participants and civilians. The graphics on pages six and seven below present the locations of truces identified by Integrity for this research and the key characteristics of the case studies used in the original report.

agreements as 'truces', the report draws a distinction between these and ceasefires, understood to be part of – and contribute to – an ongoing peace process.

⁴ For a concise summary of policy approaches to ceasefire and peace process support see: Conciliation Resources, *Ending war: the need for peace process support strategy*, 2009. For a more detailed account of ceasefire and peace process theory and practice, see: Special Edition of the *New Routes Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2009, published by the Life and Peace Institute, Sweden.

⁵ Virginia Page Fortna, *PeaceTime*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 3.

TRUCES IN SYRIA

AGREEMENT REACHED

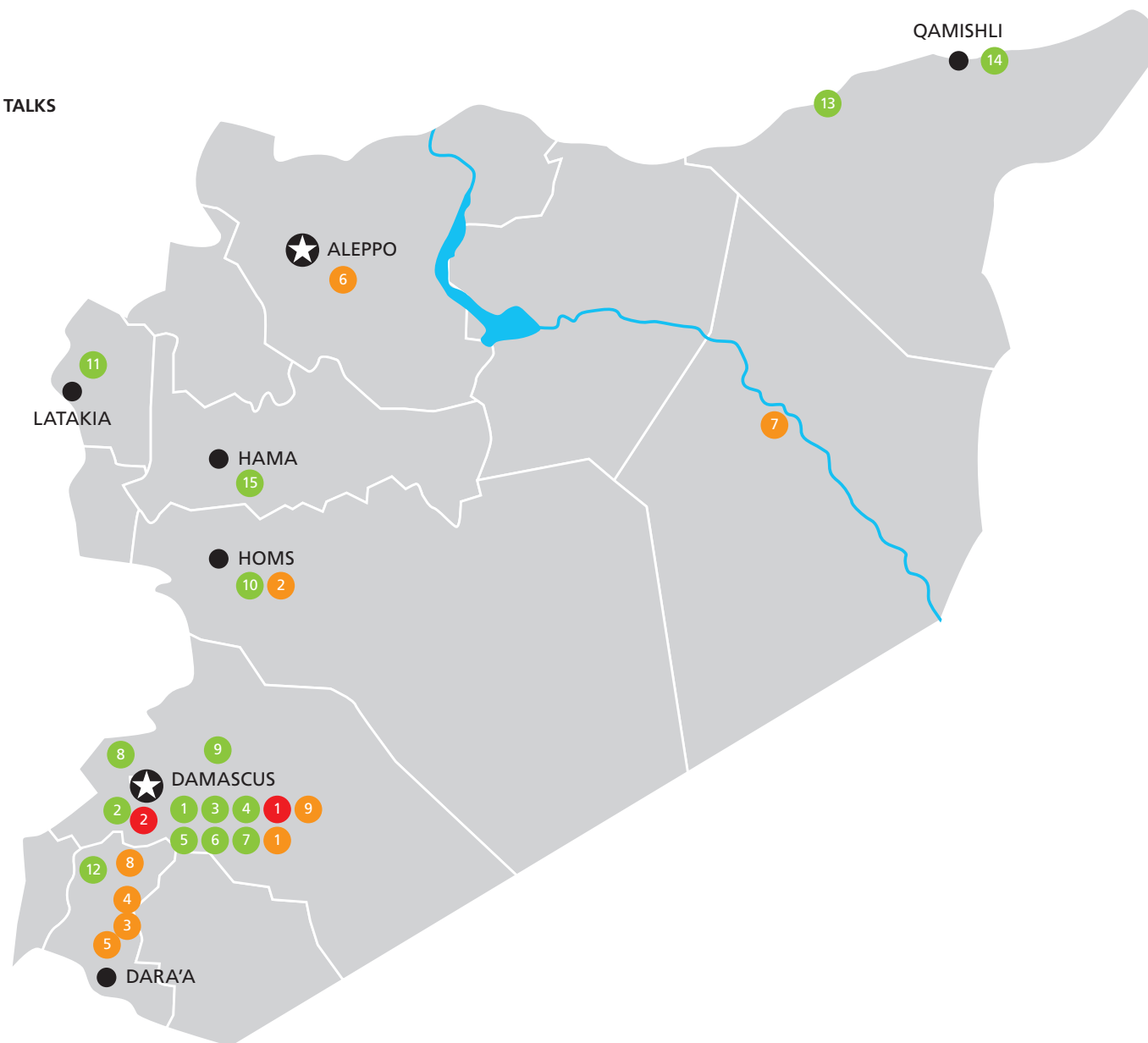
- 1 Barzeh
- 2 Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham
- 3 Babbila
- 4 Yalda
- 5 Beit Sahm
- 6 Harasta
- 7 Qaboun
- 8 Al Zabadani
- 9 Dumayr
- 10 Old Homs
- 11 Al Haffah
- 12 Al Harah
- 13 Ras Al Ain- FSA/PYG
- 14 Al Qamishli
- 15 Hama

AGREEMENT RUMOURED/IN TALKS

- 1 Al Hajar Al Aswad
- 2 El Waer
- 3 Al Hrak
- 4 Dael
- 5 Ibtta
- 6 Aleppo
- 7 Deir ez-Zur
- 8 As Sanamayn
- 9 Al Ghutah

AGREEMENT BROKEN/FAILED

- 1 Yarmouk
- 2 Darayya



TRUCE MATRIX

	Written Agreement	Verbal Agreement	Opposition Disarmament	Government Actors	Opposition Actors	Humanitarian Actors	Violations		Implementation of Terms	3rd Party Monitoring
							Hostilities	Arrests		
Barzeh	X	✓	X	Republican Guards, NDF, Aiforce Intellegience	FSA, Local Leaders, Civilian Representatives, Sheikhs	WFP, SARC	X†	✓	minimal	X
Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham	X	✓	X	SAA, 4th Division, NDF, Republican Gurd, Airforce Intellegience	FSA, LAC members	LAC Relief Office	✓	✓	minimal	X
Babila	X	✓	✓	Republican Guards, NDF, Aiforce Intellegience#	FSA, Local Leaders, Sheikhs	SARC**	X†	✓	minimal	X
Yarmouk	X	✓	✓	The GC (Fateh and PLO are neutral mediating forces)	FSA, JN, Ahrar al-Sham	UNRWA,SARC	✓	✓	minimal	X
Yalda	X	✓	✓	Republican Guards, NDF, Aiforce Intellegience	FSA, Local Leaders, Sheikhs	SARC**	X†	✓	minimal	X
Beit Sahm	X	✓	✓	Republican Guards, NDF, Aiforce Intellegience	FSA, Local Leaders, Sheikhs	SARC**	X†	✓	minimal	X
Old Homs	✓*	✓	X	SAA, Governors Office, LRC	FSA	UN, WFP, SARC	X	✓	minimal	✓

When stating FSA groups – these are local FSA fighters and may comprise of local brigades that fight under the FSA banner

* There were written terms sent from both sides, although never agreed on. The terms, which were finally agreed upon, were never officially signed by the government

** SARC was involved on a small scale

† No hostilities have taken place as of yet, however the government snipers remain in position and hostilities may erupt again

The Lebanese, Iraqi and Syrian Shiite militias consider themselves independent forces and violate the terms all the time

Analysis

Truces as government tactics

A clear majority of respondents interviewed by Integrity suggest that the negotiations over local truces are a government tactic aimed at forcing opposition-held areas to surrender.

This view was held by civilian activists, armed opposition groups⁶ fighters and members of local administrations, as well as humanitarian workers interviewed for this report. According to one humanitarian worker with insight into strategic-level decision-making around truces, the government “feels ceasefires have political and tactical value. It allows them to pretend that they have pacified Damascus and gives them space to breathe. It’s all tactical.” Interviewees articulated several elements of this strategy including: the use of starvation as a weapon of war; the harassment of displaced citizens of besieged areas; and the use of propaganda and symbols. A respondent involved in negotiating aid access describes the government’s message to civilians through such tactics as “if you give up, you can have peace.”

Siege and starvation as a weapon of war

Respondents commonly identified the use of siege tactics to exploit the humanitarian conditions of civilians and force opposition areas to surrender. Related actions include the refusal to permit doctors accompanying medical evacuees to re-enter besieged areas; the refusal to allow medical supplies as part of aid deliveries; the confiscation of food deliveries; or the denial of access for aid convoys. This suggests that the government is actively seeking to exploit the humanitarian crisis conditions in besieged areas to secure tactical military objectives.

Harassment of displaced civilians

In Barzeh and Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham the government has harassed displaced civilians in neighbouring areas to put pressure on opposition forces in besieged areas. Respondents reported that displaced Barzeh civilians living nearby have frequently had their rental contracts cancelled or not renewed upon government orders to force their return. In Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham, such tactics resulted in the return of approximately 5,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) to besieged areas. An FSA leader from Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham

⁶ “Armed opposition groups” refers to the many non-state armed units and is used interchangeably with “opposition brigades” or “armed groups.”

underscored the effectiveness of this tactic, noting that the government “knows for sure we are willing to die... but that we can’t handle the screams of our starving children.”

Propaganda and the use of symbols

Several respondents also stressed the importance of government propaganda that is intended, in the words of one interviewee, “to show the world that they are capable of reconciling their differences with the Syrians without international involvement.” The government has sought to portray these agreements as ceasefires and as evidence of national reconciliation efforts, targeted at domestic and international audiences in repudiation of the need for external mediation or interference. Similarly, a frequent condition put forward in truce negotiations by government representatives was the raising of the Syrian government flag over opposition-controlled areas or the joint manning of checkpoints by NDF and local FSA fighters. Interviewees noted that these factors related to the presentation of truces as evidence of national reconciliation between government and opposition forces. The rejection of this portrayal by opposition forces was provided as the reason for the lowering of the government flag only hours after it was raised in Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham. The use of symbols in this way appears to have exacerbated existing levels of mistrust between parties and may have played a part in stimulating or providing rationale for later violations.

Strategic location

The strategic location of certain neighbourhoods and the presence of important government assets in these areas also appear to have played a major role in government decisions to use truces as a tactic to regain control of areas. Barzeh’s proximity to a major highway and therefore its significance in facilitating or impeding important supply routes to Rif Damascus was cited by several respondents as a key driver of government strategy in negotiating a truce there. Another interviewee from Barzeh suggested that the presence of key government buildings contributed to the significance of a truce in motivating government negotiations.

The capacity of government forces to surround a neighbourhood or area has also been a factor in their ability to force opposition areas to the negotiating table. Where government forces have been able to encircle neighbourhoods, such as Yarmouk or Mu'adamiyyat al-Sham, they have been able to conduct a complete siege, contributing in large part to opposition forces agreeing to negotiations. In contrast, in Aleppo, government forces have not been able to surround the city and opposition forces are therefore still able to access supply lines from other parts of the country and from across the Turkish border.

Stakeholder participation shapes agreements

Strength of local forces is significant

Interviewees suggest that stronger opposition fighting forces such as those in Barzeh were able to negotiate better truce terms. In contrast, in Yarmouk where opposition forces were politically and militarily divided, community members felt that the opposition had conceded too many conditions in favour of government forces. The presence of foreign fighters amongst armed opposition groups has also been a factor in the development of truce terms. Opposition forces in Aleppo, for example, feature a large number of foreign fighters who interviewees suggested were less likely to countenance truce negotiations.

Government representation: military and security forces

In four of the areas researched by Integrity, interviewees noted that the Syrian government was represented in negotiations exclusively by military or security forces personnel. This absence of civilian representation suggests that the government is approaching these truces predominantly through a security lens, in contrast to the 'national reconciliation' rationale that is publically given. A similar approach was evidenced in the Syrian government's delegation to the Geneva II conference, where the prioritisation of state security and concerns over terrorism (and the related de-prioritisation of reconciliation and political reform) was reflected in the presence of strong diplomatic or military (rather than political) personnel in the formal delegation.

Local Reconciliation Councils are not trusted or empowered

Respondents suggested that the Local Reconciliation Councils (LRCs) are an active and widespread presence across all areas researched for this report except Homs. Evidence suggests that LRCs have some value in stimulating initial dialogue and in acting as mediators between parties in early stages of negotiations. However, multiple respondents pointed to a lack of adequate local representation within LRCs as a problem, suggesting that many committees are comprised of members no longer living in the area. Furthermore, several respondents also stressed that LRCs are not trusted by communities because of their association with the government. As such they offer limited value as a meaningful negotiation mechanism beyond facilitating initial contact.

Both opposition and government sides are divided

Neither government nor opposition sides are unified, a dynamic which has caused significant problems in the negotiation and implementation of truces. For instance, there are considerable doubts over the extent to which the government maintains control over the

NDF. This division, reported to Integrity by several interviewees, is seen by the Carter Center as a marked trend: “the ranks of pro-government paramilitary groups are growing, signaling a further decentralization of state authority.”⁷ Such increasing levels of autonomy and the growing lack of government control over paramilitary forces have had significant impact on truce violations through violent attacks or the confiscation of aid. Several respondents also highlighted divisions within government negotiating parties, between lead military representatives and government intelligence and security services, particularly Air Force and Military Intelligence, who have sought to leverage a greater role in truce negotiations.

Interviewees also noted that there were significant divisions between opposition groups. These commonly emerged over specific terms of truces or responsibilities or were related to the rejection of any kind of truce or negotiation with the government. Several respondents stressed that other opposition groups throughout Syria saw negotiations as ‘treason’ or a ‘betrayal’ of the conflict.

Flawed process: Negotiation, implementation, monitoring and violations

Vague terms and inadequate implementation mechanisms

In all areas covered by Integrity’s research, truce terms were vague, contested, and never agreed upon or signed by all parties. Confusion most commonly related to:

- Modalities of truce implementation and the roles and responsibilities of parties
- Details of civilian evacuations and safe passage (such as numbers of civilians, evacuation sequencing, routes)
- Aid delivery convoy routes, timeframes and access

This confusion contributed to significant logistical delays and coordination problems and resulted in insufficient or inappropriate aid distribution (such as a lack of medical supplies) and in limited numbers of civilians who were eventually evacuated.

Absent monitoring mechanisms

Ceasefire best practice underscores the significance of monitoring mechanisms to support the implementation of agreements, and to support the enabling environment for a broader peace process. Such monitoring mechanisms were absent in all cases researched for this report except Homs, where the UN played an integral role and was able to influence the

⁷ The Carter Centre, [Syria: Pro-government Paramilitary Forces](#), November 2013, p. 3.

implementation of the truce. Multiple civilian respondents stressed the importance of third party monitoring but noted that this runs counter to the government’s interest in limiting truce discussions to domestic actors only. Several interviewees also suggested that UN bodies in Syria are perceived to lack the authority required to act effectively as truce or ceasefire monitors. Additionally, as a result of the UN’s need to work with the Syrian government, some interviewees also reported community perceptions around the lack of neutrality, potentially limiting their effectiveness as third party monitors in some areas.

Limited humanitarian impact

Evidence suggests that despite some instances of positive improvements, the overall humanitarian impact of these truces has been limited. Respondents note that the engagement by humanitarian actors in the truces researched by Integrity was largely restricted to truce implementation and the delivery of aid. The one exception to this was the UN’s active role in the negotiation process in Homs; facilitating dialogue between opposition and government parties and negotiating and coordinating humanitarian arrangements. The role played by the UN, in particular, the leadership displayed by UN Resident Coordinator Yacoub El Hillo in deciding not to halt convoys despite sniper and mortar attacks, was praised by several interviewees.

However, several respondents were critical of the effectiveness of the UN’s humanitarian operations in Homs or in supporting the humanitarian outcomes of other truces. This reflects a perception among some respondents that aid deliveries were not adequate for population needs. For instance, during the truce negotiations and in preparation for the delivery of aid, the Homs Local Council prepared a list of needed food items and estimated the total number of food baskets required by the besieged population. This estimation came to approximately 30kgs of food per person with 3000 food baskets requested. Yet, aid deliveries that were part of the Homs truce totaled approximately 500 food baskets of about 2.5kg. These included the items listed below, which according to the Homs LAC last for approximately one month per person:

Item	Quantity per Person
Rice	250 g
Flour	1 kg (approximately)
Groats (cereal grain)	250 g
Oil	1 litre
Canned Beans	300 g
Sugar	300 g

Much of the responsibility for the inadequacy of this humanitarian impact can be located with actions by government forces consistent with the perceived strategy of ‘forced surrender’. To a lesser extent, this limited impact may also be attributed to the effects of poor aid coordination and planning. Evidence collected from interviews and from material provided to Integrity by truce stakeholders emphasises the inadequacy of the humanitarian aid that managed to reach civilian populations.

In addition to the apparent inadequacy of food aid deliveries, most respondents reported that their communities had received insufficient levels of medical supplies. This was despite the prioritisation of medical supplies during most truce negotiations. This was attributed to:

- Constraints on access for humanitarian actors
- Denial, diversion or stalling of aid convoys
- Confiscation or theft of aid by government forces (and subsequent sale of aid for profit)
- Attacks on humanitarian actors

Nearly all respondents interviewed for this report identified multiple instances where humanitarian actions were hindered, most frequently by government security forces or pro-government paramilitary groups.⁸ This may be attributed to the reportedly growing lack of government control over the NDF or part of specific government tactics to provide a bare minimum of aid to extract further concessions or encourage new truces in opposition areas.

Politicisation of humanitarian aid

Multiple respondents suggested that these limited humanitarian outcomes also reflect a trend of the politicisation of aid in the conflict that has seen the denial of aid deliveries and the targeting of aid workers exploited for strategic purposes. This was evidenced by the detention and arrests of civilians including women and children and the harassment of IDPs to return to besieged areas in Barzeh, or the confiscation and subsequent re-sale of aid by government forces in Yarmouk and Mu’adamiyyat Al-Sham. As a response to the levels of arrests, one aid worker from Rif Damascus noted that some colleagues are making personal decisions not to evacuate men of fighting age to state hospitals due to likelihood of detention. The politicisation of aid was also represented in the growing number of attacks

⁸ Several interviewees from Yarmouk and from Mu’adamiyyat al-Sham report that government forces confiscated aid supplies which were subsequently sold back to besieged communities. One respondent from Mu’adamiyyat al-Sham noted that government forces “have even opened shops at the outskirts of the city where we are forced to buy from them and they sell us food three times more expensive than market value. They have made massive profit from the truce!”

upon humanitarian workers. One employee interviewed by Integrity noted that increasingly, “volunteers are so scared of being targeted by armed groups or arrested [by government forces]. The fear is all around and hampers everything we do.”

Sustainability and contribution to peace

The agreements currently in place in some parts of Syria are truces at best. When assessed against the key components of ceasefires it is clear that at both a practical and strategic level, the political will that is essential to transform truces into ceasefires that are part of a broader peace process, is markedly absent. As such, these truces are unlikely to create the enabling environment required for longer-term peace negotiations.

The key components of a sustainable ceasefire are missing

Truces have not raised the cost of future attacks

Ceasefire agreements can raise the costs of future attacks “through practical measures such as buffer zones and troop withdrawal but also through public commitments to peace.”⁹ The ‘practical measures’ included in the truce agreements researched for this report were extremely limited and related mainly to only very few disarmament measures and minimal shared security management arrangements. Evidence also suggests that there was little public commitment to peace on either side. Interviewees reported that government claims of reconciliation were viewed as propaganda, with the denial, confiscation or exploitation of humanitarian aid by government forces cited as evidence. A majority of opposition respondents also stated that there was little interest in reconciliation with truces viewed as an only brief pause in hostilities. These factors appear to make future attacks ‘cheaper’ and more likely.

Truces have not reduced uncertainty or signaled the clear intentions of actors

The large number of competing actors with divergent agendas in the negotiation process has also contributed to an atmosphere of doubt and increased uncertainty regarding the intentions of negotiating parties. Internal division and competition among parties; the apparent lack of government control over the actions of the NDF; and reported opposition divisions over truce terms and implementation arrangements, or opposition acceptance of agreements at all, underscores this point. This atmosphere is not conducive to the clear signaling of actor intent that is a characteristic of successful and sustainable ceasefires.

⁹ Luc Chounet-Cambas, [Negotiating Ceasefires](#), Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2011, p 35, p. 9.

Truce mechanisms were not in place to prevent accidents from escalating

The mechanisms of communication and organisation that produced these truces were flawed. Ineffective communication channels strengthened the likelihood of misinterpreted intentions or of violations escalating and few practical measures were introduced. The multiple violations reported by most respondents emphasise the limited impact truce agreements had on reducing the likelihood and impact of accidents and violations spiraling into larger or renewed confrontation.

Political will is crucial and currently absent

Underpinning this dynamic is a fundamental absence of political will for peace through negotiation, a factor that all ceasefire scholars and practitioners see as crucial. Most pro-opposition respondents interviewed by Integrity for this report reject reconciliation. Similarly, the apparent exploitation of the humanitarian situation and the use of local truces by the government as a tactic to retake areas suggests that there is little will on that side for peace either. If these local truces are to contribute to a broader peace process, some way of fostering the political will for meaningful negotiation will need to be identified. At present, the conflict dynamics at local, national and regional levels represent significant obstacles to this.

Improvements to humanitarian impacts may be possible

While Integrity's research suggests that the humanitarian impact of these local truces has been minimal, respondents note that improvements to humanitarian impacts may be possible. By focusing more on leveraging political capital and resources to improve the implementation and aid delivery phases of such local truces, it may be possible to improve the humanitarian impact of local truces. International pressure such as in Homs (direct involvement) or in Mu'adamiyyat Al Shams (pressure upon the Syrian government by states) has contributed to some level of improvement in the humanitarian condition. However, the factors that constrained delivery in recent truces, as well as the government's apparent exploitation of truces as part of its strategy to retake areas, are likely to remain relevant and therefore to considerably hamper efforts to improve humanitarian outcomes.



**LISTEN
COMPREHEND
RECOMMEND**