



‘We don’t want to lose anymore’: Inside the complex peace process that helped Syrians find an end to the fighting

 RANIA KHALEK · AUGUST 13, 2018



In war torn areas across Syria, a series of reconciliation deals overseen by the secret fixer of Damascus, Khaled al Ahmad, has given residents a respite from the bloodshed.

By Rania Khalek

BEIRUT, LEBANON - Since the Syrian government’s reconquest of its southernmost regions, only two zones remain outside its control. Turkey still occupies parts of Idlib, Latakia and Aleppo in the northwest of the country, relying on proxy militias including the Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which has changed its name several times. Meanwhile, the US and its allied Kurdish militias occupy the northeast. Khaled al Ahmad, Assad’s secret emissary introduced in [part 1](#) of this series, seems to have played a key role in influencing the final outcome in the latter region.

According to American officials, a series of meetings al Ahmad convened with Kurdish leadership in Moscow last year convinced the Kurds to adopt a more conciliatory posture towards Damascus. American officials who had been working with the Kurds had also pushed them towards pragmatism, urging them to reach their own agreement with the Syrian government to avoid the fate of the rebels of southern Syria, who were abandoned by their foreign sponsors ahead of their defeat in June 2018.

When Trump announced in March 2018 that he wanted to withdraw from Syria “[very soon](#)“, it became clear to Kurdish negotiators that they needed to plan for the day after. The Americans told them to see the [statement the US issued to the southern rebels](#), which bluntly informed them that “you’re on your own,” as a message to the Kurds as well.

But American officials say it was al Ahmad’s meetings with Kurdish leaders that convinced them they could reach a compromise with Damascus along the lines of Law 107. Written before the uprising but approved by Assad after it began, Law 107 increased decentralization and local governance across Syria. Due to the uprising and the Baath party’s suspicion that it would loosen its grip on power, the law was never implemented. Still, al Ahmad pushed for years for Law 107 to be seen by the opposition and Kurds as an alternative to their extreme demands. Americans familiar with the meetings say al Ahmad warned the Kurds that if they didn’t accept the return of Syrian state control, they would be making themselves vulnerable to a punishing Turkish invasion as well as a future clash with the Syrian army.

Meeting with al Ahmad encouraged the suspicious and inexperienced Kurdish negotiators to accept gestures from Damascus. Al Ahmad basically offered them a reality check, reminding them what happened to the other armed groups considered illegal in Syria and what they

would face if they failed to negotiate the return of state institutions to areas under the control of their militias. He made it clear to them that they could not change Damascus, that the most they could aspire to was the implementation of Law 107 in their areas.

This engagement between Americans, Kurds and al Ahmad goes as far back as the Obama administration, when Syrian government forces and Kurdish forces were battling ISIS in the northeast. It was when al Ahmad met Obama’s head of Middle East Policy, Robert Malley, according to an American official briefed on the meetings, that the issue of cooperation against ISIS arose.

Known to be skeptical of US regime change efforts, Malley frequently turned to al Ahmad for ammunition against the anti-Assad hawks in the White House. While al Ahmad was able to shape Malley’s arguments, the two did not see entirely eye to eye. Al Ahmad bristled at Malley’s offer of US support for the Syrian army in the war against ISIS in exchange for Assad committing to relinquishing power. The Syrian negotiator dismissed it as a recipe for state collapse and a violation of Syrian sovereignty.

Other Western officials like former British envoy John Wilks alienated al Ahmad with their arrogance or inflexible anti-government positions. But overall, when meeting with representatives of the “anti-regime” countries, it appears al Ahmad was able to chip away at the simplistic understanding of his country’s leadership as cartoon villains, and impress upon Western diplomats an understanding that Damascus was defending itself from an extremist-dominated insurgency. These engagements have laid an important foundation for the Americans to achieve withdrawal from northeastern Syria without losing face.

Al Ahmad used the expression “hope is the enemy of peace” in more than one meeting with Western officials. His focus was less on the nitty gritty negotiations on the ground, and more on promoting what the government called “reconciliations” as a strategy, planning it and planting it in the heads of his country’s military and security officers while he promoted it among international officials. He reasoned that if the rebels still held out hope for victory, they would reject peaceful alternatives. According to opposition representatives now based in Turkey, al Ahmad was the figure they turned to when they finally abandoned their dream of regime change — or when they became disillusioned with the nightmare their revolution had become.

Where it all started

Al Ahmad’s first negotiating success arrived back in 2011, in the Damascus suburb of Duma. East Ghouta, of which Duma is the largest town, was an early site of demonstrations. There, according to opposition sources now based in Turkey, al Ahmad negotiated a truce of sorts between the government and the newly formed opposition forces on the street led by Nizar Somadi and Adnan Wahbe, two Duma elders.

Al Ahmad offered Duma’s opposition the right to demonstrate freely in exchange for a commitment that they not attack public or state property, not approach police or security stations and not exceed time limits of a few hours for demonstrations. The deal lasted for a few months but the elders soon lost control over the street to restive youth and the Islamist elements that would later establish Jaysh al-Islam, or the Army of Islam, a powerful Salafi-Jihadist militia backed by Saudi Arabia. Eventually, hardline Islamists assassinated Adnan Wehbe, the negotiator who had been al Ahmad’s main contact. This depressing pattern would repeat itself again and again over the years that followed, with local opposition leaders engaged in negotiations with the government assassinated in places like Harasta, al Tel, Duma and elsewhere.

Seven years later, al Ahmad found himself again involved in negotiations for Duma and East Ghouta.

It was March 2018, and the rebel held enclave of East Ghouta was on the brink of surrender to the military might of a combined Syrian and Russian military offensive. In an echo of the December 2016 deal for eastern Aleppo, some rebels and civilian supporters exited their area on green buses headed for Idlib, others fled to government areas where NGOs helped house them, while some leaked into the urban fabric of Damascus and the rest simply chose to remain in their homes.

Rebel leaders now in Turkey say it was al Ahmad who helped connect them to the right Syrian and Russian officials to negotiate terms of surrender that would prevent an even more punishing attack on East Ghouta. They also say al Ahmad convinced stubborn rebel leaders that they had to drop their hardline demands, easing the way for the safe evacuations that eventually followed. Opposition leaders from East Ghouta, now based in Turkey, also credit General Kamal Hassan, head of the Palestine Branch of military security, with playing a key role in reconciliations for their areas. Hassan was very involved, along with al Ahmad, in the 2014 and 2015 negotiations to pacify southern Damascus neighborhoods like Babila and Yalda, an experience that helped Hassan persuade the Damascus Sunni religious leadership to cooperate with the state after their relations with the government had cooled during the uprising. These links would later prove useful when Hassan persuaded the same religious leaders in Damascus to negotiate with their former colleagues and contacts in East Ghouta.

According opposition sources, al Ahmad moved on next to the central Syrian city of Homs, once referred to by the opposition as the “capital of the revolution.” This was his hometown, and it is now fully in government hands, but it was where many phenomena associated with the Syrian war first came to light.

Homs was likely the petri dish for the first armed rebel groups, and they were confronted by the first armed “popular committees,” as local loyalist self defense militias were called (or “shabiha, in the lexicon of the opposition). Foreign support to rebels first flowed through Homs; it was funneled through Lebanon’s Wadi Khaled by partisans of Lebanon’s Saudi-backed Future Movement. Homs is also where the sectarian civil war first erupted in Syria, as Alawite and Sunni neighbors in the city and its surrounding countryside played out a brutal blood feud. And it’s where the first mutual kidnappings and kidnappings for ransom took place. But just as Homs saw the birth of so many of the war’s horrors, it’s also where many of the solutions for the war were developed.

Homs was also where the first safe evacuation of rebels on buses took place, where they were moved from a rebel area the government was besieging, further north to areas controlled by rebels. This first example of this, in 2014, created a pattern that would repeat itself over and over again.

In February 2014 Assad gave a speech in front of all his governors instructing them that reconciliations were their new strategy. At the time it would have proved difficult to implement such a strategy given the rigid and uncompromising mentality of Syria’s system and because rebels and their backers wanted to escalate the conflict to achieve “regime change.” In the end when Assad needed somebody to implement his ideas on reconciliation, he chose al Ahmad. While many enemies of the government condemn it for refusing to compromise in Geneva and essentially surrender, they fail to recognize that like it or not, the government was engaging in diplomacy to end the war. With al Ahmad as Assad’s representative internationally and sometimes locally they were pursuing options besides war. And when many other officers and commanders began holding meetings with rebel leaders throughout the country there was a real diplomatic process of people sitting and negotiating. But it never received international support. In fact, Al Ahmad’s reputation as Assad’s fixer, secret diplomat and mediator has led some European officials to push for adding him to sanctions lists. However, his lack of an official government role and the fact that many European officials rely on him as a channel to Damascus has stifled any such effort.

Al Ahmad’s career as Assad’s eyes and ears on the ground appears to have started in Homs, as the 2012 leaked Assad emails show and according to UN humanitarian and political officials who worked on Syria at the time. David Lesch, an academic who was once sympathetic to Assad and then turned against him during the uprising, referred to al Ahmad as “king of the Shabiha” following a 2013 meeting with him

and Assad advisor Bouthaina Shaaban. But accusations that he was involved in “shabiha” activities are false, according to opposition sources who turned to him for help in Homs. They say he worked on preventing a sectarian bloodbath in the areas and managed to delay the civil war of Homs while helping secure the release of people kidnapped by rival Sunni and Alawite gangs.

Al Waer and Homs

Al Waer, a newly built middle class mixed neighborhood on the outskirts of Homs city, was relatively safe in the first half of the Syrian war. It housed many state employees and officers who were given apartments there. It also contained an older more conservative area known as Old Waer where Sunnis of mainly tribal origin lived.

Waer is adjacent to two small Shia neighborhoods called Mazra and Ragaa. From early on, conflict raged between Old Waer and the Shia neighborhoods. Demonstrations were held regularly at Old Waer’s fire station by its tribal residents, who were already armed from prior to the conflict, and who clashed with security forces and neighboring Shias, who were also armed. But the government managed to lower tensions by negotiating a ceasefire in Waer in 2012, even as other areas of Homs were on fire. Following the battles of Bab Amer, when rebels took over Old Homs, hundreds of thousands of displaced Sunnis found sanctuary in Waer.

Within two years, as the violence between rebels and the government intensified, the Sunni population of Waer began to dwindle and rebels poured in. By 2015, the government had lost control of the town, making it a semi-autonomous bastion of the opposition and insurgency that started in Old Homs.

Al Ahmad plunged himself into negotiations, hoping to avoid a brutal fight that would trigger mass displacement. He insisted that only state security and police officers be present, barring members of military intelligence or the airforce, whom the rebels particularly resented. And he reopened the hospital and state institutions as an olive branch to fighters. They were asked to hand over their weapons in exchange for an amnesty or an option to stay inside Waer unharmed until a broader settlement was reached. This arrangement lasted successfully for a couple of years but as pressure on besieged Old Homs increased, the dormant rebel groups in Waer were themselves pushed to come to the aid of their allies. Thus they began attacking government forces while rebels from Old Homs and Waer organized secret supply routes through tunnels and empty agricultural areas. The escalation that followed spawned massive displacement and did catastrophic to Waer’s physical infrastructure.

It wasn’t until the **final evacuation of fighters** took place in May 2017 that Waer was reintegrated into the state, allowing its original residents the opportunity to return home. According to people involved in the reconciliation process in Waer, this second round of negotiations took two years, in part because the Turkey-based Syrian opposition has refused to surrender the city to the government. The government, for its part, made a display of obstinacy while officials in Homs profited from the siege they had imposed on Waer once it was viewed as dangerous again. The siege had allowed them to charge extortionist rates on goods coming into Waer.



Damaged buildings in al Waer, a town on the outskirts of Homs in Syria

After reconciliation

I visited Waer in the summer of 2017, just a few weeks after the reconciliation agreement had been negotiated. Most of the fighters and their families had chosen to leave to rebel-held Idlib and Jarabulus in the north, which is near the Aleppo countryside and under the control of the Turkish army. But the conditions up north were so abysmal that hundreds of families had returned to Waer. Those returnees added to the number of residents that were from Waer but had been living in government areas in Homs and elsewhere. In 2018, two international NGOs, Premier Urgence and Caritas, began working on shelter rehabilitation in Waer, hoping to facilitate the return of even more locals.

When I arrived in Waer the scars of war were everywhere. The damage might not have been as extensive as in East Aleppo or Old Homs, but every single building in Waer was pierced by artillery and shelling and nearly everything on the inside had been stolen and whatever was left was broken. In one building I inspected, the marble flooring had been ripped out of every single apartment unit.



Above and below: destroyed apartments in Waer





Destroyed apartment in Waer being used as a post by Syrian security.

There were massive holes in the walls, probably to make it easier for rebels to move from one unit to the next. Bathtubs, refrigerators, tables, bed frames and other household appliances were piled on top of each other alongside mountains of people’s personal belongings. Graffiti adorned the walls with declarations like, “the revolution will live on forever.”

Yet amid the destruction, life was beginning to return to some semblance of normalcy for those trickling back in. Bakeries and stores were open for business, people were shopping, children played in the street.



Local resident grills meat in Waer as life resumes following a reconciliation deal.

While exploring Waer’s newly reconciled neighborhoods, I met Amny, a 30-year-old mother of three. Amny’s son, Ruda, was playing in the street and led me to their home, a ground floor apartment they were squatting in. Ruda was eight years old but his growth had clearly been stunted; he looked to be about five or six. But he was full of life, running around and giggling with his two little sisters, Rehaf, age six, and Mayar, age four, and his three-year-old cousin Omar.

Over a glass of orange juice, Amny explained to me how her husband was detained by the government a year earlier and never heard from again. “One day he went to his job and never came back. They took him without explanation,” she said. She got word from friends in

Damascus that he was in Sednaya prison.

The house was empty of furniture. Amny had packed it all up and taken it with her to Jarabulus. Her husband’s detention is the reason her family chose to flee to Jarabulus when the government retook Waer. She told me she didn’t want to leave, but her in-laws guilted her into it: “My husband’s family was afraid, so they left and asked us to go with them. I refused at first but they said if anything happened to the kids it would be my fault, so I went.”

Jarabulus was worse than she could have imagined, run by armed gangs with limited resources, so she returned to Waer with her children against the wishes of her husband’s family. “Here in Waer at least we have a house and electricity,” she said. “Over there we were fighting for water.”



Ruda, 8, and Omar, 3, pose for a photo in their apartment in Waer after returning from a refugee camp in Jarabulus.

Those who stayed in Waer during the conflict were excited to see their neighbors trickle back in. Jassem al Hamid, a 55-year-old businessman, stayed in Waer for the duration of the conflict with his wife and four children—three girls and one boy. He wanted to make sure his house stayed intact. And it did.

“It’s my house, my family, my town,” he said. “We as Syrian people only want peace. The most important thing is being safe. We hope all the people who left Syria come back. They should know that they are going to have security if they do.”

Jassem hasn’t worked since he was forced to close his office five years ago. He’s trying to reopen it now that people are returning. “We suffered all the time from the siege,” he said. “What killed me the most was seeing my children hungry.”

His daughter tried to continue her studies, but couldn’t. “Our experience in Waer will be a model for all of Syria. The government is trying its best to put out a good image because a lot of people left because they were afraid of all the violence. We hope that we got past the worst of it and that people begin returning.”

Back when armed groups entered Waer from Old Homs, the government immediately imposed a siege. However, they still allowed women and children to come and go. Most people I spoke to said that aside from being searched at a few checkpoints, the armed groups left them alone. Others said the armed groups prevented them from leaving. The real problem seemed to be the fighting — constant sniper fire made it impossible to leave one’s house.



Ruins of a building in old Homs



Rubble in Old Homs

Mediha, 26, calmed her fussy two-year-old daughter, Shams, as she told me how desperate the situation became for her and her family when the opposition militias were honeycombed within their neighborhood. “The armed groups weren’t allowing us to go get bread,” she said. “They would shoot at us when we tried to leave the house.”

Mediha’s husband, a lawyer at the local justice department, was shot by rebels in 2013 during Ramadan. The bullet remains lodged in his chest, close to his heart and spine. He wasn’t able to continue working following his injury. She says he went to Idlib in hopes of reaching Turkey for proper medical treatment. He paid money so he wouldn’t have to join the army, but his mother, Seema, says he was also scared of being taken prisoner by the government.

Revenge and exhaustion

While Western pundits often framed the war in Syria as a sectarian conflict pitting Alawite against Sunni, the reality for Syrians was far more complex. Syria is a majority Sunni country and most Sunnis remained supportive of the Syrian state during the conflict. Because the

mostly Sunni areas bore the brunt of the rebel takeover, many of their residents became repulsed by the presence of extremist Sunni rebels, demonstrating more resentment for them than minorities aligned with the government..

This helps explain why the Syrian colonel who controlled the checkpoint in Waer had harsh words for the insurgents.

“The Syrian army is from all sects,” he told me. “The terrorists are not.”

The colonel is Sunni and like the Sunnis who make up some 75 percent of Syria’s population, he was outraged that the insurgency sought to impose a Sunni supremacist state run along jihadist ideological lines on the rest of the country.

“I’m a Sunni security guy with the mukhabarat. I’m from Idlib,” the colonel continued. “These sons of bitches took over my town. Even if I disagree with all the governors and officials in Syria, I’m not going to destroy my country. Is there any ‘revolution’ in the world that destroys hospitals and prevents children from going to school? They want only to destroy Syria. We are not going to allow them. When the US and the *khaleejis* [Gulf states] and that son of a bitch Erdogan stop arming the rebels, Syria will be at peace.”

Hayat Awad, an energetic and charismatic pro-government activist and journalist who lived in Homs throughout the conflict, took a much more conciliatory tone. Hayat wears a photo of her son, a Syrian soldier, around her neck. He was killed in Daraa in 2016. Hayat is from an Alawite-majority neighborhood in Homs called al-Zahra. Surrounded by Sunni-majority areas, Zahra became a regular target of the rebels during the fighting. Hayat says she used to be far angrier and vengeful but after years of war, she is simply exhausted. Today, Hayat hoped for more reconciliation deals in the few remaining pockets held by the armed opposition.

“Mothers of martyrs say enough,” she told me. “We lost our children. We don’t want to lose anymore. So enough is enough. No more wars.”

Gradual reform

Elia Samman is a member of one of the three branches of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), historically an opposition party in Syria that technically remains illegal, though today it is part of the ruling coalition. Elia’s family is originally from the old city of Homs. That is where his father’s house is. Elia also has a home in Waer as he prefers the quiet of the suburbs to the noisy city. Even now he lives in the suburbs of Damascus in an area called Dumar, which, like Waer before the war, is a neighborhood that was recently built and has a mixed population of middle class families.

Elia is also an advisor to Syria’s minister of reconciliation, Ali Haider, and believes the reconciliation process offered the country its best way out of the war. At least two and a half million Syrians have been impacted by the reconciliation process, including some 450,000 who had been able to return to their homes, he told me at his home in Dumar.

And he hopes to see major changes in the way the government functions. Elia blames government policies for the nasty sectarian turn of the uprising, explaining that by depriving the suburban and rural areas of the country of economic vitality, it set the stage for the spread of religious extremism.

Elia and his family left Homs in 2012, as soon as the rebels seized his neighborhood. He described the fighters as “local young people with nothing to lose. Young uneducated men with no jobs.” He knew many of them. Before the conflict spiraled into all-out war, Elia was involved in the demonstrations as a member of the local coordinating committee.

“We tried hard to prevent arms from infiltrating into the demonstrations,” he recalled with a tone of regret. “Unfortunately the influence of money and media was much stronger than us. It was under the banner of protecting the demonstrations, but when you arm yourselves, you are inviting violence. We couldn’t prevent it. We could not resist the sectarian banners and demonstrations. So we decided to quit. As a party as well, we decided to ban our party members from participating in sectarian demonstrations.”

The uprising took on a sectarian flavor practically overnight. Elia owned a restaurant in Homs. He had 17 employees. Nine were Sunni and the rest were Alawite and Christian. Out of nine Sunnis, seven joined the rebels. The two who did not join were cashiers and educated, he said.

“A few days before I closed down the restaurant, my Sunni employees were accompanying their Alawite colleagues to their neighborhoods. It was pushed in a sectarian direction.”

Elia faulted the government for allowing the foundations for sectarianism to develop even if unknowingly.

“It started in Syria in 2000, when Saudi Arabia started pouring millions of dollars into the country, especially in remote areas, spent mostly on building mosques and religious schools, spreading the Wahhabi doctrine. It was totally new to Syria. In Syria, the Sunnis are Sufis. Those idiots in the security agencies here were just happy money was coming into the country,” he told me.

“For ten years, the mosques never talked politics — nothing against the president or Baath [Party] or Shias. They just swept society and cleared young minds,” Elia continued. “They built a generation that was ready to do whatever the sheikh said. We were aware of that and we warned the government security guys.”

Elia described inviting a Lebanese novelist to Homs in 2010 for a lecture. “Naturally in Syria we needed to take special permission,” he recalled. “The answer was no. The security guy said I cannot give you permission because you are an illegal party and I can put you in jail. I said, you might think we are bad but we are much much less bad than these Wahhabis you allow to work in every mosque in every countryside every day of the year.”

“That’s why until today, if you talk to the fighters, you rarely find fighters who are originally from the big cities. They came from the countryside,” he explained.

Elia went back to his home in Waer after the reconciliation ended the fighting, but it had been completely destroyed by artillery. He isn’t angry, he’s just happy the fighting there is over. He also believes the reconciliation process is creating the conditions for Syrians to reform the government gradually by establishing some more local control, as seen in towns like Hammeh, while giving people the space and safety to rebuild their lives.

But despite the benefits on people’s daily lives, some in the international community continue to express disapproval of the reconciliation process due to the way the agreements come about.

“Any reduction in violence is positive,” conceded a UN worker in Damascus who asked not to be named because they were not authorized to speak on the issue in an official capacity. “But our problem is the way these agreements are reached. Many were under siege, militarily encircled, subject to heavy bombardment for years. It’s not like the agreements were reached through negotiations, they were reached through force.”

The UN also worries that humanitarian aid was being used as a bargaining chip in the negotiation process: “We’re concerned about the way UN assistance is used for these agreements. We’re not invited, we’re not at the table. We know from secondary information that we are used either as a stick or carrot in negotiation in these agreements. If you don’t agree, they tell these populations that the UN will not give them assistance. If you do agree, they’ll help you rebuild. The fact that humanitarian assistance is used as a prong to reach these agreements is wrong.”

On top of that, the UN issued objections to the evacuation of fighters who refused to put down their weapons. The first incident in which rebels were given safe passage was May 2014 in Old Homs, where they were given safe passage to Northern Homs and from there, to other areas of opposition control. Homs’ urban center became safe after that and eventually returned to normal. The same scenario took place in areas where fighters were evacuated. But oftentimes fighters took their families with them, and this is where the UN took issue.

“Sometimes you have evacuation of fighters and families,” the UN official said. “Those families are civilians. In other places, you have some civilians choosing to leave to go to Idlib if they don’t want to be in government areas. But there are no rights, right to property, right to return, they fall very very short of basic international standards. There are no guarantees in terms of freedom of movement.”

However flawed the process behind the reconciliation deals might have been, civilians have overwhelmingly judged the peace they have brought to be preferable to endless fighting. In areas where the reconciliation process has been successful, the benefits to civilians and the swiftness with which life returns to some semblance of normalcy has been drastic.

Still, Syria’s war is not yet over. Questions remain over how to reach an agreement with the Kurds and Americans over the north east. There is also the fate of greater Idlib, which is largely under the control of an Al Qaeda affiliate and the possible target of a major government offensive. Will it fall into Turkish hands permanently, will it gradually merge with the rest of Syria or will it be retaken through a grinding military operation? And how will Syrians adapt to the post-war situation given that the **male population has been completely battered and a productive economy has been replaced by one of predation?**

Then there is the issue of al Ahmad. Can a man like him return to his career in business, possibly earning a small fortune off of reconstruction efforts, or will he have to retain his official position as a semi-secret negotiator? The durability of his deals will not only determine the course of his career, but the future of his country as well.



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