

Al-Lajat: A Partial, and Dangerous, Return for Displaced Residents

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More than two and a half years after their displacement, residents have returned to some villages in the Al-Lajat area of rural northeastern Daraa governorate with Russian support, while the residents of other surrounding villages are still delaying their return home until certain promises are met.

Accompanied by Russian military police patrols, more than 80 families returned on January 21 to the towns of Ibb, Assem and Al-Najeih. During meetings with notables and local representatives, the Russian Reconciliation Centre in southern Syria had promised multiple times that displaced people would be able to return to the area, in coordination with the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps.

Shortly after residents returned on January 21, the Syrian regime's Military Security arrested some of the returnees to Ibb, including a Fifth Corps commander. In response, protests broke out across Daraa. Military Security eventually released the detainees.

A number of returnees told *The Syria Report* that settling back down in the area is difficult due to the lack of basic necessities as a result of the near total destruction of infrastructure, including water and electricity networks, and wide scale destruction of buildings. This is in addition to fears among returnees of being arrested at the hands of regime security forces, who have erected checkpoints at the entrances to their towns and villages.

Residents of the area also need to repair their homes—whether due to partial or total damage. However, few of them have the resources to pay for these repairs.

Even cemeteries were damaged when regime forces and pro-Iran militias defaced the graves of opposition commanders and fighters from the area who had been killed while fighting against the regime. The damages have increased residents' fears of potential reprisals against opposition sympathisers, should they return to and settle down in the area. Those concerns have prevented many people from returning to their hometowns.

Meanwhile, other residents have preferred to set up tents in their hometowns, where they have settled down until their home repairs are finished. Some of them fear that if they leave the area while awaiting restoration, they will have to enter yet another round of negotiations with the regime to allow their return, which may take many additional years, as the previous round had.

Regime forces and allied militias stormed Al-Lajat in northeastern Daraa towards the end of 2018, forcibly displacing residents before razing some villages completely in order to set up military bases. Forcible displacement of the area's residents occurred after a settlement agreement had already been made for southern Syria, and regime forces had retaken the area. More than 5,000 people were expelled from Al-Lajat, and more than 200 arrested. 80 of the detainees are still held by the regime.

The forced displacement and razing of these villages took place due to their proximity to some newly established Iranian military sites in Al-Lajat, which are used as weapons and ammunition storehouses, as well as training camps.

Residents were displaced to nearby villages and towns, where some families set up tents on surrounding farmland. Displaced people from Al-Shiyah, Al-Shoumareh, Al-Doureh, Housh Hamad and Al-Taf have urged the Eighth Brigade of the Fifth Corps, and Russian military police, to allow

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them to return to their hometowns, which are now controlled by militias affiliated with Iran's Quds Force.



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