

Siege Watch

Fourth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria August - October 2016



Colophon

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Photo cover: Children protest forcible transfer in al-Houleh, 27 September 2016

About PAX

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The Syria Institute (TSI) is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan think tank based in Washington, DC. TSI was founded in 2015 in response to a recognition that today, almost six years into the Syrian conflict, information and understanding gaps continue to hinder effective policymaking and drive public reaction to the unfolding crisis. Our aim is to address these gaps by empowering decision-makers and advancing the public's understanding of the situation in Syria by producing timely, high quality, accessible, data-driven research, analysis, and policy options. To learn more visit www.syriainstitute.org or contact TSI at info@syriainstitute.org.

Siege Watch

Fourth Quarterly Report - Covering the August-October 2016 period

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Acronyms

AOG	Armed opposition group
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SYP	Syrian Pound
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency
UNSC	UN Security Council
UNSG	UN Secretary-General
WFP	World Food Program

Executive Summary

This report is the fourth in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria's besieged communities. This report focuses on developments from August to October 2016.

Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that:

- ◆ Sieges in Syria are expanding, and an estimated **1,326,175 people** are trapped in at least 39 besieged communities across the country.
- ◆ The Syrian government and its allies remain responsible for the majority of existing sieges, as well as all “Watchlist” areas, **where more than 1.1 million** additional Syrians face the threat of complete siege.
- ◆ Four communities – eastern Aleppo city, Madaya and Douma in Rural Damascus and al-Waer in Homs – require immediate and unfettered international assistance to prevent looming humanitarian catastrophes. These four critically imperiled areas combined contain more than half a million people.
- ◆ In contrast to the previous reporting period, the August-October period was characterized by an intensified effort by the Syrian government to force besieged communities into submission, using military escalation and coercion to forcibly displace besieged populations. These forced population transfers are war crimes.

- ◆ During the August-October reporting period, the Syrian government and its allies broke longstanding truces with opposition-controlled enclaves in Rural Damascus that had previously enjoyed relative stability.
- ◆ UN agencies in Damascus repeatedly ignored or denied calls from besieged communities to monitor government negotiations and subsequent forcible population transfers.
- ◆ Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias now play a central role in enforcing Syria's sieges and both countries participate in overseeing local forced surrender negotiations.
- ◆ Civilians in many besieged communities will face serious food insecurity and vulnerability to cold this winter as a result of the capture and destruction of agricultural land, deforestation, and severe access restrictions.
- ◆ The medical situation in besieged areas is alarming, as life-saving medical supplies continue to be excluded from most aid convoys and hospitals are being targeted at an increasing rate.
- ◆ Indiscriminate attacks and attacks against civilians, including with internationally banned landmines, cluster munitions, and chemical weapons, as well as with incendiary munitions, bunker busters, and explosive weapons with wide-area effects, are being conducted on besieged communities at an alarming rate.
- ◆ The status of detained and disappeared persons is a key issue in local truce negotiations in besieged areas but remains the most difficult issue to resolve and often derails truce implementations. There are not currently any known cases in which the Syrian government has fulfilled this clause in local agreements.
- ◆ Civilian residential areas and critical services including hospitals, schools, and Civil Defence (search and rescue) centers were both indiscriminately attacked and intentionally targeted by the Syrian government and its allies. These attacks deliberately undermine the resilience of besieged communities.

This reporting period was notable for the number of forcible transfers from besieged areas as the government and its allies have shifted tactics from “surrender or starve” to “surrender or die”, in an effort to neutralize besieged communities, alternating intense attacks with periods of negotiation. After the complete destruction and depopulation of Darayya in August, other communities faced increased pressure to capitulate. Local negotiating committees are being coerced through a mixture of threats, lies, warnings and ever-changing terms, pushing besieged residents to new depths of despair. Communities are forced to accept conditions that leave them vulnerable to abuse and to make concessions without any guarantees that the government side will comply. For example, in al-Waer, the Syrian government extracted concessions and evacuated a number of fighters, but when it came time to implement its concessions and release information on 7,500 detainees, pro-government forces instead launched a new wave of attacks.

Darayya, in Rural Damascus, was completely destroyed during the reporting period and its entire population surrendered and was forcibly displaced. An additional community, Hosh Nasri in the Eastern Ghouta area of Rural Damascus, was captured in a military offensive and its entire population was displaced into other besieged communities in Eastern Ghouta.

Moadamiya and the two “Watchlist” communities of Qudsaya and al-Hameh were forced to capitulate to government truce conditions under the threat of increased violence and destruction. Some of these conditions include disarming, forced transfer of part of the population, and conscription into the Syrian army for military-aged males. In return, the communities are supposed to get the return of goods and services, normalization of civilian movement, and in some cases the release of detainees. While there is potential that these developments could lead to lasting improvements for civilians, there is also fear and concern that the conditions imposed by the government have left the population extremely vulnerable to human rights abuses.

According to Siege Watch reporting sources, Russian and Iranian intermediaries are overseeing the local negotiations. In almost all recent cases, local negotiating committees have reached out to the UN agencies in Damascus to request independent monitoring of the agreements and their requests have been ignored or denied. In some instances similar requests have been made for years without result. The UN has said that they only “get involved in evacuation operations when requested by all parties.”¹ As a result, the deals reached in these besieged communities have been capitulations made under extreme duress, resulting in violations of international humanitarian law.

At the beginning of the August-October Siege Watch reporting period, UN OCHA recognized 590,200 Syrians living under siege. This total rose to 861,200 with the addition of eastern Aleppo in September. Then, shortly after the end of the Siege Watch reporting period, the UN announced that after a “comprehensive review,” it was increasing its estimate to 974,080 as of 1 November. The main cause of this increase was the recognition of 16 additional besieged locations in Rural Damascus. Nearly all of these newly added locations have been besieged since 2013 by the Syrian government forces, and Siege Watch has long advocated for their recognition. The official UN population figures for besieged areas have nearly tripled since Siege Watch began monitoring and reporting in late 2015, but even these new estimates fall short of the more than 1.3 million people trapped in besieged areas that are monitored by the project now. Most of the discrepancy is due to the fact that the UN reporting still does not recognize the besieged enclaves of northern Homs governorate, where an estimated 272,000 people have been trapped under complete siege since 2013. The sieges in the al-Houleh, al-Rastan, and Talbiseh areas of Homs all meet the UN’s official criteria for the besieged designation.

In addition to violating United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015), the deliberate starvation of civilians is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and therefore a war crime. Forced population transfers constitute another war crime committed as part of the strategy of sieges. The sieges of civilians in Syria inflame sectarian tensions, destroy communities, and undermine UN-led negotiation efforts.

¹ Bahira al-Zarier, Osama Abu Zeid, Orion Wilcox, and Sama Mohammed, “UN declines to monitor Waer evacuation: ‘We only get involved when requested by all parties,’” 22 September 2016, <<http://syriadirect.org/>>.

A successful approach to addressing the besieged area crisis must be based in an accurate understanding of the situation on the ground. Accordingly:

- ◆ UN agencies should recognize the full scale of sieges, including the long-besieged communities of the northern Homs countryside. Failure to do so may encourage the expansion of the Syrian government's "surrender or die" strategy, and depress international response. Donors should require transparency and independent oversight of designations moving forward to ensure that data is not politicized.
- ◆ Strong, principled, and consistent leadership is required to respond to local requests for assistance in monitoring local ceasefire negotiations and ensure that they are implemented without further violations of international humanitarian law.
- ◆ Parties who continue to violate UN Security Council Resolutions and international humanitarian law (IHL) with regards to besieged areas and hinder access are committing war crimes that may amount to crimes against humanity. Concrete steps to set up accountability mechanisms are needed urgently.
- ◆ Ultimately, it is clear that humanitarian aid shipments will not solve this problem. The UN and the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) must invest more time, energy, and political will into lifting the sieges and ending this festering scourge on humanity, and shift focus away from convoy counting.

NOTE

Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period were from August-October 2016. Since then, there may have been subsequent developments impacting many besieged communities. Please check www.siegewatch.org for the most recent updates.

1. Introduction

This report is the fourth in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria’s besieged communities. This report focuses on developments from August to October 2016.

Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that sieges are growing, with an estimated 1,326,175 Syrians now living under siege in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, and Idlib governorates. More than 1,100,000 additional people live in areas on the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” which face siege-like conditions and are at risk of becoming completely besieged. Conditions in many besieged and “Watchlist” areas deteriorated over the reporting period as a result of increasing violence and decreased humanitarian access. Four communities containing approximately 582,000 people – eastern Aleppo city, Madaya and Douma in Rural Damascus, and al-Waer in Homs – require immediate and unfettered international assistance to mitigate unfolding humanitarian catastrophes.

Despite numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access,² and the creation of the International Syria Support Group’s (ISSG) Humanitarian Task Force in February 2016,³ the Syrian government – and in a few cases Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and armed opposition groups (AOGs) – continue to besiege communities across Syria.

² UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015).

³ UN, “Note to Correspondents: Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” 11 February 2016, <<http://www.un.org>>.

After review and reassessment of their data, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) finally acknowledged a significant number of besieged areas in Rural Damascus that Siege Watch has consistently reported as besieged. Though this recognition is an encouraging step, further review is still necessary to acknowledge the full scale of sieges throughout Syria. UN OCHA's failure to acknowledge the reality on the ground is problematic because the reporting plays an important role in framing the international community's understanding of the situation, which shapes the urgency and nature of its response. Without international action to break, de-escalate, or seek criminal accountability for the sieges being waged against civilians in Syria, these numbers will continue to grow.

Siege Watch monitors Syria's besieged areas using data collected on an ongoing basis from an extensive network of reporting contacts in besieged communities. Information on besieged communities is published in the interactive map on the Siege Watch website (www.siegewatch.org), on the Twitter feed (@siegewatch), and through in-depth quarterly reports.⁴

This report focuses on developments from August to October 2016. Additional updates since then will be included when available. For a detailed background on the project and additional information on the specific besieged areas, refer to the first Siege Watch report published in February 2016.

Project Outline

UN OCHA defines a besieged area as follows: "For the purposes of the Syrian conflict, a 'besieged area' is an area surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter, and civilians, the sick and wounded cannot regularly exit the area."⁵ This same definition is used by the Siege Watch project and all of the communities described in this report meet or exceed this standard.

The Siege Watch project designates three tiers of siege intensity, using a classification scheme proposed by SAMS in its March 2015 'Slow Death' report.⁶ While all three tiers meet the UN OCHA criteria for besieged, and the tiers help further describe the variations in conditions in different area, drawing attention to the besieged communities where civilians are in the most immediate need. The designations range from Tier 1 (highest intensity) to Tier 3 (lowest intensity):

- ◆ Tier 1 – This is the highest level of siege, where very little is able to enter through smuggling or bribery, the UN can negotiate few if any aid deliveries, and supplies that do enter are insufficient for the population. Residents are at high risk of malnutrition/dehydration and denial of medical care. The area is frequently attacked by besieging forces.

⁴ Note: the situation in several of the besieged areas of Syria was changing quickly as of time of writing. Visit www.siegewatch.org for the most up-to-date data on specific communities.

⁵ UN OCHA, "2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," November 2014.

⁶ Syrian American Medical Society, "Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege," March 2015, <<https://www.sams-usa.net/>>.

- ◆ Tier 2 – This is the moderate level of siege, where small amounts of supplies can usually be smuggled in through bribery and purchased on the black market for inflated prices. Vehicle deliveries cannot enter but residents may have access to alternative food sources such as local agriculture. The UN is able to negotiate few if any aid deliveries and assistance that does enter is insufficient for the population. Residents in these areas are at some risk of malnutrition/dehydration and at high risk of denial of medical care. The areas are regularly attacked by besieging forces.
- ◆ Tier 3 – This is the lowest level of siege, where supplies still must be smuggled in but are done so with regularity and the population has consistent access to alternative food sources such as local agriculture. The UN is able to negotiate some aid deliveries, but assistance that does enter is insufficient for the population. Residents in these areas are at low risk of malnutrition/dehydration and at moderate risk of denial of medical care. The areas are occasionally attacked by besieging forces.

The primary condition that demonstrates that an area is besieged is when it is surrounded by armed actors who restrict the movement of goods and people into and out of the area. A siege is an intentional tactic meant to deprive a populated area of the essentials needed for life. Other factors such as the level of violence, the delivery of aid convoys, and the availability of smuggling routes can change the intensity of the siege (the Tier level) but do not impact whether an area is designated besieged under the Siege Watch system. For example, in Deir Ezzor, aid delivery has become frequent and regular as a result of the World Food Programme (WFP) airdrops, but the neighborhoods are still surrounded by ISIS forces that prevent the delivery of supplies by ground routes, and civilian movement is still restricted by both ISIS and the Syrian military. Accordingly Deir Ezzor is still considered besieged, but has been classified as Tier 3 to reflect the improved humanitarian conditions.

Siege Watch identifies an additional category of “Watchlist” locations that are at high risk of becoming under long-term siege. This category includes: communities that are under partial siege, where many of the conditions of a siege are met but a limited number of access points may be usable at least part of the time; newly besieged communities that have been blockaded for three months or less; and communities where a siege has recently ended. Communities newly under siege are first added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” and in most cases will be considered for inclusion on the besieged list after a three-month observation period. Similarly, communities where a truce has brought an end to the siege will remain on the “Watchlist” for a probationary period of three months to ensure that the situation does not regress back to complete siege. Each siege situation is unique, and discretion may be used in waiving this three-month requirement should developments on the ground require it. For more details on the data collection process, please see the first quarterly Siege Watch report from February 2016.

Challenges

The difficult, dangerous, and fluid circumstances on the ground in the besieged areas of Syria continued to present challenges for the Siege Watch project during the reporting period. Poor internet access, lack of electricity, bombings and other safety-related issues, and shifting

priorities among reporting contacts all impacted the type and amount of information gathered. Large population displacements between communities within the besieged Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period once again hampered efforts to make accurate estimates.

The challenge of maintaining a network of voluntary reporting contacts was compounded during the reporting period by the forcible transfers from communities that surrendered to the government. In addition to local fighters and their families, the groups deported from “reconciled” communities have included local council members and activists who maintain contact with the outside world. Siege Watch contacts were evacuated from several communities during the reporting period, making it challenging to monitor post-surrender developments.

While the Siege Watch tier system can be a useful tool to help stakeholders better understand the conditions in besieged communities and the variations between them, the circumstances in each area are unique, and do not always fit neatly into a classification. A number of areas currently on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” face siege-like conditions, and the decision to leave them on the “Watchlist” is not clear-cut. Communities that face some movement restrictions and some supply restrictions can blur the distinction between besieged and not besieged. In these cases of uncertainty, the Siege Watch project has opted to take a conservative approach and keep areas on the “Watchlist,” if any doubts exist. All such cases are frequently monitored and reevaluated on an ongoing basis.

Rapid developments in some areas at times outpaced data collection efforts. Where updated information is available, it is noted in the report.

General Developments

Conditions in many besieged areas deteriorated significantly during the August-October reporting period as a direct result of the shifting government strategy aimed at neutralizing sieges through periods of intensive military force. This reporting period was notable in comparison to prior period for several reasons: the number of forcible surrender agreements and population transfers, attacks initiated against several communities that had been relatively stable under longstanding truces, and the overwhelming bombardment of Aleppo, still ongoing.

This reporting period was also notable for the absence of any real political processes that could give besieged residents hope of reprieve in the future. Diplomatic efforts to return to the Geneva talks and restore a nationwide Cessation of Hostilities have produced few results, while the situation on the ground has continued to deteriorate dramatically.

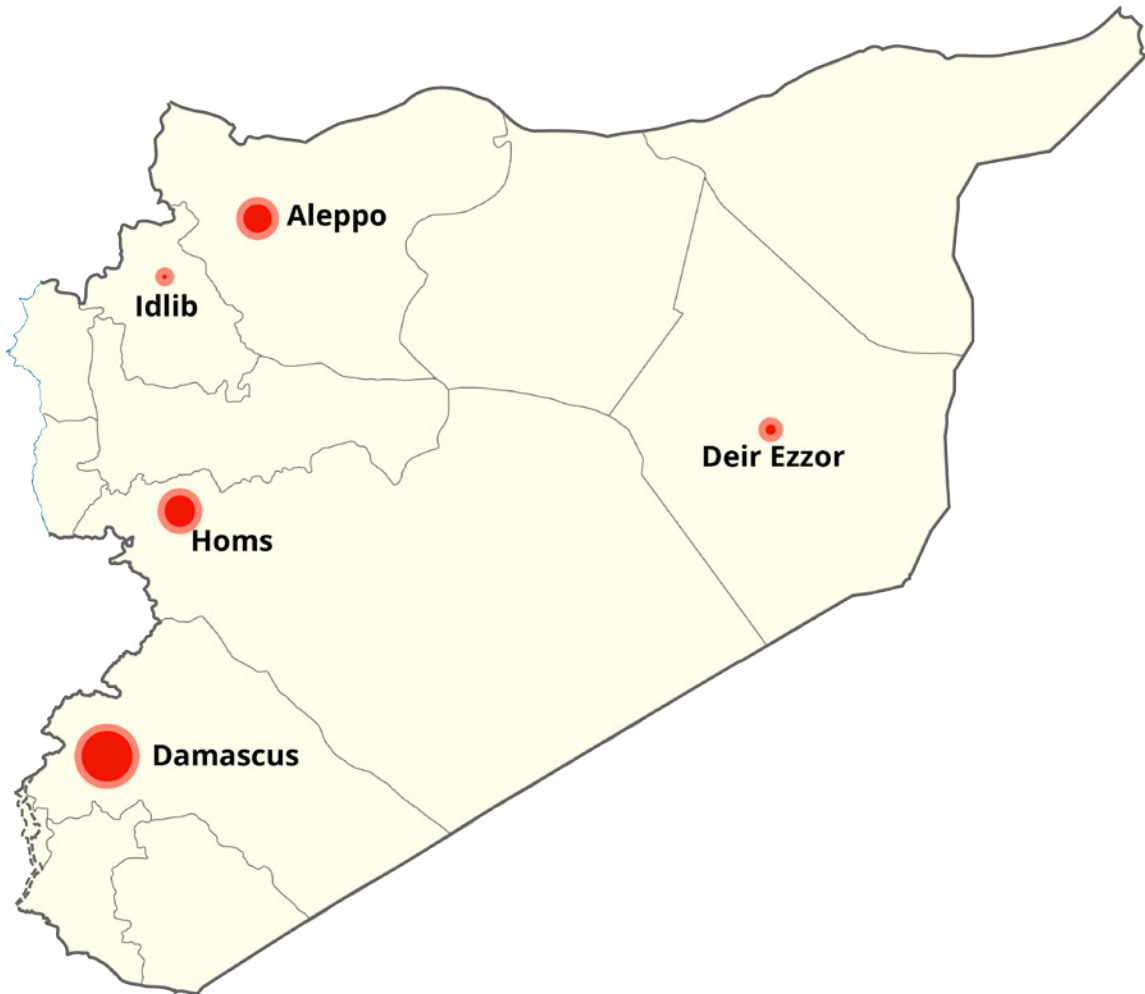
After the complete destruction and depopulation of Darayya in August, other communities faced increasing pressure to capitulate to government terms. In this new Syrian government strategy, negotiating committees are being coerced through a mixture of threats, lies, warnings and ever-changing terms; pushing besieged residents to new depths of despair and forcing communities to accept conditions that leave them vulnerable to abuse and to make concessions without any guarantees of government side would compliance. Deprivation, heavy bombardment, and the destruction of essential infrastructure such as hospitals leave the populations to choose between death and capitulation. For example in al-Waer the Syrian government extracted concessions and evacuated a number of fighters, and then when it came time to implement

its concessions and release information on 7,500 detainees it instead launched a new wave of attacks. Siege Watch contacts repeatedly described the active roles played by Russian and Iranian advisors in determining the negotiation outcomes during the reporting period.

The high levels of violence described in the previous Siege Watch report continued and in many cases increased through the end of October. The targeting of hospitals and other civilian infrastructure increased notably, depriving residents of besieged areas of the coping mechanisms to withstand the ongoing sieges. This trend is particularly troubling as the region enters winter, and residents face decreased access to food. The number of civilian deaths due to weather and malnutrition-related causes is likely to increase significantly during the coming period.

Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province

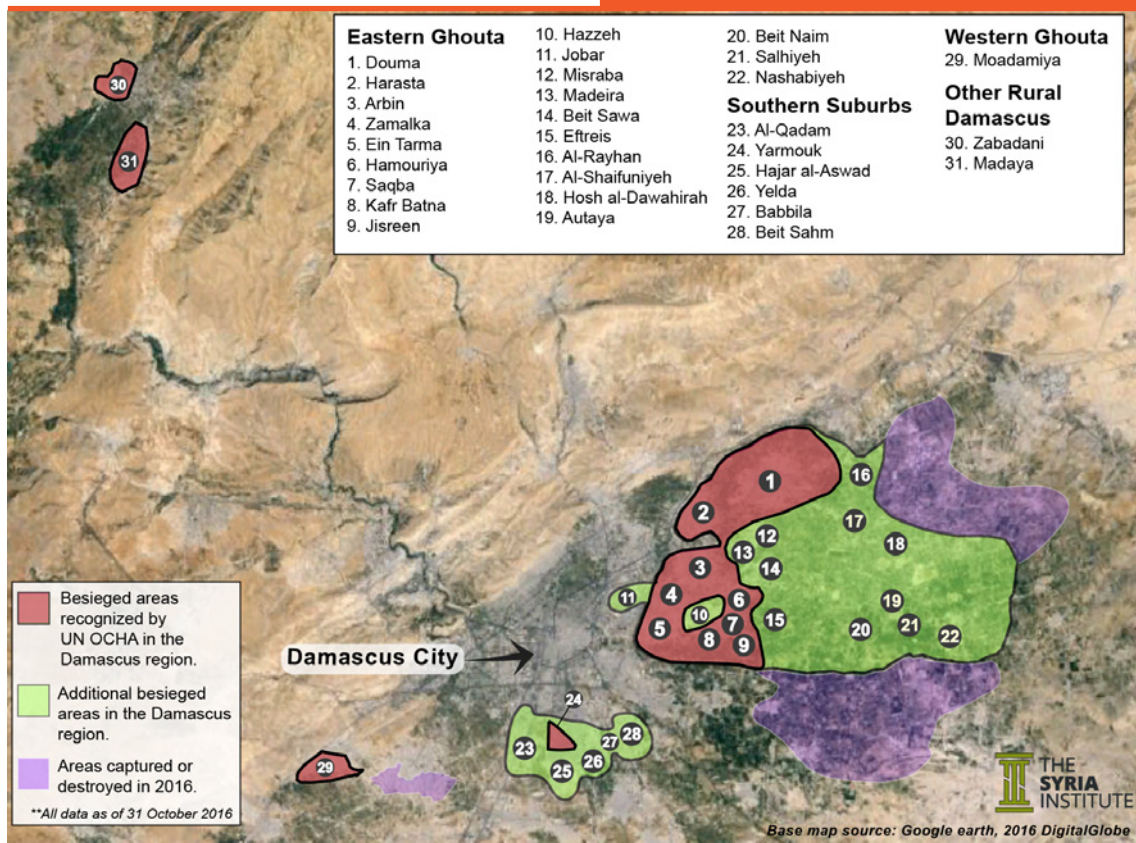


2. Besieged Community Overview

Damascus

Map 2:

Besieged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus



EASTERN GHOUTA

Table 1:

Eastern Ghouta Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Eastern Ghouta (22 communities)	Mainly 2	Syrian Govt.	Over 405,975

*Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 31 October 2016. See Annex I for a complete list.

[Note: Following the end of the reporting period, the UN officially recognized a number of Eastern Ghouta communities as besieged as of 1 November, thus bringing its data more in line with Siege Watch. All of the newly designated communities have been under siege since 2013, and Siege Watch has long called for their official designation.]

Snapshot:

Conditions in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated throughout the reporting period as a result of escalating attacks by ground and air forces. In September the rural village of Hosh Nasri was captured by pro-government forces and its remaining residents were displaced. As a result, the number of besieged communities in Eastern Ghouta was lowered to 22, although the overall population has not changed.

Details:

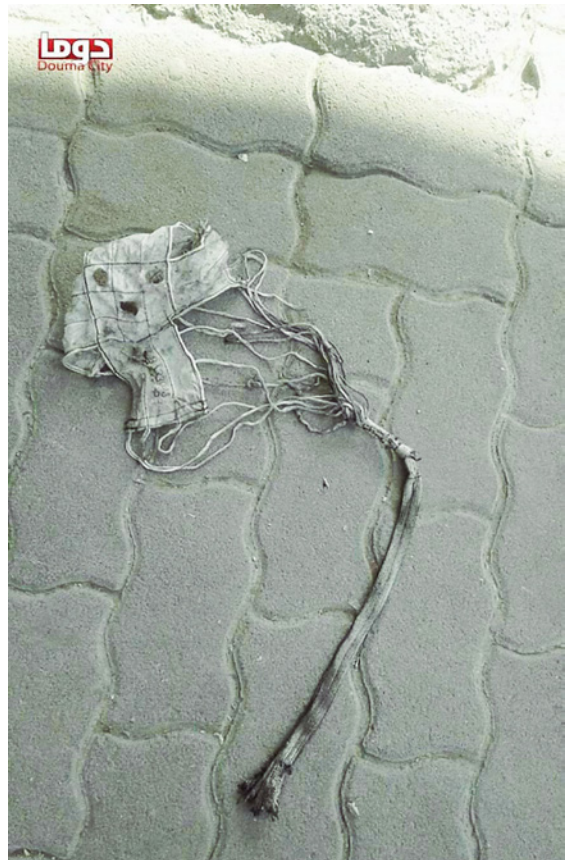
The Eastern Ghouta area of Rural Damascus governorate, along with the adjacent neighborhood of Jobar which is part of Damascus proper, remained besieged by government forces and pro-government militias. There are at least 22 communities within this besieged area.⁷ Conditions in Eastern Ghouta overall continued to slowly decline as a result of intensified bombing and attacks by pro-government forces during the August-October period. Siege Watch respondents noted that the attacks appeared to target primarily population centers instead of opposition military locations.

Communities near government-controlled areas of Damascus experienced daily shelling during the reporting period, but all parts of Eastern Ghouta were impacted by Syrian and Russian airstrikes. Some of the notable attacks:

- ◆ 04 August – The al-Marj hospital was taken out of service by government airstrikes. This was the only remaining hospital in the rural southern portion of Eastern Ghouta, serving tens of thousands of people.
- ◆ 10 September – Douma was targeted with 10 airstrikes in one day. The next day on 11 September the town reported non-stop attacks with cluster munitions, one of which struck a center where children were playing.
- ◆ 16 September – Pro-government forces launched a deadly offensive against Jobar from the northwest side that lasted for five days.
- ◆ 29-30 September – Syrian and Russian airstrikes pummeled towns across Eastern Ghouta. At least four airstrikes hit Jisreen, 7 airstrikes hit Arbin, and others hit Kafr Batna and Douma. Dozens of civilians were killed and injured.
- ◆ 09 October – Douma was bombed intensively with all sorts of weapons, including cluster munitions and incendiary munitions.⁸
- ◆ 12 October – An estimated 40 airstrikes hit towns across Eastern Ghouta in a single day.

⁷ See Annex I for a full list of besieged communities. Communities included are based on the administrative areas listed in UN OCHA's 2013 "Syria P-code and Place Name Gazetteer," which can be found at: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/syrian-arab-republic-administrative-boundaries>. There are a number of small rural villages not captured in this schema, so the actual number of populated areas in besieged Eastern Ghouta is likely higher than recorded.

⁸ "TSI Syria Updates: October 10, 2016," The Syria Institute, <<http://syriainstitute.org>>.



Various weapons used in attacks on Douma in October.

Pro-government forces continued to make territorial gains on the eastern front during the reporting period, capturing the village of Hosh Nasri by late September and displacing the remaining population. Nearby rural communities are at extreme risk as the fighting continues, and most of the residents of these areas have already fled the frontlines, moving into more populated areas including Douma, Arbin, Misraba, Zamalka, and Hazzeh. Towards the end of the reporting period, the community of al-Rayhan appeared to be on the brink of capture by pro-government forces. If it is fully captured it will leave nearby Douma and Harasta vulnerable to isolation from the rest of Eastern Ghouta. The Syrian army used a similar strategy earlier in the year successfully, leading to the isolation and capture of the southern sector of Eastern Ghouta. In Douma a negotiated surrender is more likely than complete capture, as it is more densely populated than the rural southern sector was. There were rumors that Jaysh al-Islam – the primary opposition faction in Douma – was in the process of negotiating surrender during the reporting period.

The internal displacement continues to present new challenges for Eastern Ghouta, straining besieged host communities that do not have sufficient resources to provide for even their original residents. Furthermore, the areas that have been captured by pro-government forces are primarily agricultural land. This decreases access to locally grown crops for the more than 400,000 residents of besieged Eastern Ghouta and increases the likelihood of a food crisis moving forward.

People in some communities described deteriorating internal security conditions as a result of ongoing tension between armed groups. For example, in Arbin there were clashes between armed opposition groups at the start of August with casualties on all sides. In Hazzeh, moving at night has been difficult due to checkpoints and searches by opposition fighters, in addition to some cases of kidnappings and killings by unknown perpetrators. On 6 October, armed groups exchanged fire in Hazzeh, wounding two of the members. Throughout the reporting period there were intermittent reports of civilian protests calling on the armed groups to unify and fight the government instead of fighting each other.

As previously reported, a pro-government merchant continues to sell some goods at the al-Wafideen checkpoint near Douma. The government controls the amount and type of goods, adds a mark-up price several times the amount they are sold for in Damascus city. Beyond that, local agriculture is a critical source of support for the people of Eastern Ghouta. Smuggling tunnels connected to Barzeh and Qaboun remain in use.

Fuel shortages continue to plague Eastern Ghouta, and the limited fuel that is available in markets is too expensive for most to afford. In the past several years of siege, people have cut down trees in rural Eastern Ghouta to burn for fuel in the winter. This winter the extent of the deforestation will have a significant impact on the humanitarian situation, as there is no longer enough wood to burn. Procuring safe drinking water is also difficult for most of the population. Sewage and rubbish buildup has increasingly become an environmental and public health issue, contributing to the spread of diseases. Baby milk is among the hardest commodities to find.

Access restrictions remain in place and movement is generally not possible into or out of Eastern Ghouta. A pair of conjoined twins born in June named Nawras and Moad were the only reported medical evacuations from the area. They were evacuated only after there was an outcry from the international community. The evacuation on 10 August came too late, and the twins died several weeks later. One reporting contact noted the need for psychosocial support, particularly for children traumatized by the war.



Boy injured in cluster munitions attack on Douma children's center, 10 September 2016

Only two communities in Eastern Ghouta received international humanitarian assistance during the August-October reporting period:

- ◆ Harasta was reached twice during the reporting period with UN interagency assistance: on 29 August and 29 October.
- ◆ Douma was scheduled to receive UN humanitarian assistance in late September but pro-government forces blocked the convoy. On 19 October, a 26-truck UN interagency convoy reached Douma, but the aid it contained was sufficient for less than one quarter of the population and lacked critically needed baby milk.

None of the other communities in Eastern Ghouta received international assistance during the past quarter. The amount of food in the convoys that were sent to the towns listed above was insufficient to meet the needs of the targeted communities alone, and had no impact on humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta as a whole. Medical supplies continued to be removed from convoys.

The overall population of Eastern Ghouta remained relatively stable during the reporting period. Due to the internal displacement, populations of many communities within Eastern Ghouta changed considerably during the same time period. The ongoing population shifts made it difficult to determine revised population figures with high confidence, and stakeholders should use caution if attempting to use these current estimates for operational purposes.

SOUTHERN DAMASCUS SUBURBS

Table 2:

Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	3,500
Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	15,000
Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	8,000
Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	16,500
SUM:			65,500

Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 31 October 2016.

Snapshot:

No notable changes during the past quarter.

Details:

The humanitarian and military situation in the southern suburbs of Damascus remained relatively stable during the reporting period. The area is still surrounded by Syrian military forces and sectarian pro-government militias, and the besieged neighborhoods themselves are still controlled by a patchwork of armed groups, including ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra). Four of the six communities – Yelda, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and al-Qadam – all have truces with the government but conditions have not completely normalized.

As described in the previous quarterly report, Damascus' southern suburbs enjoy some entry of basic commercial goods into the area through the government-controlled checkpoints. The amount and type of supplies that enter this way are limited and incur a tariff that inflates prices by approximately 20 percent. Some of the goods that enter are filtered into Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk, where access is more limited due to the presence of ISIS forces and internal armed group checkpoints.

The southern suburbs did not receive any UN humanitarian aid during the reporting period. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is responsible for aid shipments to the area. It has been unable to make a delivery into the southern suburbs since 25 May 2016.⁹ Despite the flow of some commercial goods into the southern suburbs, medical supplies are still restricted and there are serious shortages of trained

⁹ "Syria: Humanitarian Snapshot, July – September 2016," UNRWA, <<http://www.unrwa.org/>>.

medical staff, supplies, and ambulances. Movement of people into and out of the area is limited to those who are not at risk of arrest by the Syrian government, primarily women, the elderly, and students. Even this movement is intermittently interrupted by closures. Most able-bodied men will not risk crossing the checkpoints due to the significant rates of forced conscription into the Syrian military.

Internally, local armed groups and ISIS maintain checkpoints between and within the neighborhoods. This can make internal movement challenging – particularly for those in ISIS-controlled Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad. Some residents feel that they are besieged by both the Syrian military (externally) and ISIS (internally) due to these internal restrictions. None of the besieged areas have running water or electricity, and people rely on generators and well water to survive.

Though the situation in the truce neighborhoods of the southern suburbs has been relatively stable, local residents are increasingly concerned after witnessing the breakdown of truces and subsequent forcible displacements in other areas such as Qudsaya and al-Hameh in the Rural Damascus countryside.

Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm were in truce negotiations with government forces during the reporting period but no conclusions were reached. A truce agreement would entail the removal of checkpoints, the release of political prisoners who are still alive, information on prisoners who were killed, the registration and/or removal of weapons, conscription of those delinquent in military service, and the raising of the Syrian flag. In other examples of recent negotiations from other besieged areas, the terms involving the status of persons – particularly of the detainees – have been the most challenging to resolve, and have often derailed local negotiations.

Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad do not have ceasefires in place with the Syrian government and both neighborhoods are dominated by extremist armed groups. ISIS controls Hajar al-Aswad and part of Yarmouk, while JFS also maintains a presence in part of Yarmouk. As a result, residents in these areas are more isolated and face poorer humanitarian conditions than the rest of the southern suburbs. Civilian movement from ISIS-controlled Hajar al-Aswad into other nearby besieged communities is rare and restricted to women. There have been no international aid deliveries targeting the population of Hajar al-Aswad, and prior to 1 November it had never been designated as besieged by the UN. *[Note: Following the end of the reporting period, the UN officially recognized Hajar al-Aswad as besieged as of 1 November, thus bringing its data more in line with Siege Watch. Hajar al-Aswad has been under siege since 2013, and Siege Watch has long called for their official designation. As of early 2015, Hajar al-Aswad had one of the highest rates of siege-related deaths in the country.¹⁰]*

Yarmouk remains inaccessible to UNRWA, which until May, distributed aid to the adjacent suburb of Yelda for displaced Yarmouk residents, as well as for those still living inside the camp who are able to make the risky journey. UNRWA humanitarian aid has not been distributed directly inside of Yarmouk since March 2015.¹¹ Yarmouk citizens survive due to the other nearby towns that are under truce with the government as well as some produce provided by local armed groups running farming projects. Internal checkpoints separating Yarmouk from

10 "Slow Death - Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege," Syrian American Medical Society, March 2015, <<http://www.sams-usa.net/>>

11 "Syria: Humanitarian Snapshot, July – September, 2015," UNRWA, <<http://www.unrwa.org/>>.

surrounding suburbs make movement difficult. Intermittent clashes continue between ISIS, JFS, and local armed groups. Yarmouk does not have a functional local council. Civilians live under tense circumstances, as ISIS imposes its ideology on the people living in the areas it controls.

WESTERN GHOUTA

Table 3:

Western Ghouta Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Moadamiyet al-Sham	2	Syrian Govt.	41,000
SUM:			41,000

Snapshot:

Darayya was removed from the besieged list after it was forced into surrender by the government and its entire population was transferred in late August. Moadamiya surrendered to the government negotiation terms in October. A small portion of its residents were transferred as a result of the agreement, leading to a change in the population estimate and Tier level.

Conditions in the Khan al-Shieh, currently on the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” deteriorated during the reporting period and it is under consideration for reclassification as besieged.

Details:

Darayya – In the previous quarterly report, Siege Watch warned that Darayya was on the brink of disaster. Less than one month into the August-October reporting period, Darayya was forced to surrender to the Syrian government in the face of unprecedented and devastating attacks. Nonstop barrel bombing, shelling, and attacks with napalm-like incendiary weapons forced the remaining population – which was estimated at 8,300 – pinned under ground for weeks without food or water. On 19 August, the only remaining medical center in Darayya was destroyed in an airstrike using incendiary munitions, which started a fire that residents struggled to put out. In the face of imminent destruction, Darayya surrendered several days later, and the population transfer began on 26 August. This transfer is considered forcible because it was made under extreme duress, when residents had no options left but to die or to surrender. As with other recent population transfers from besieged areas, the Darayya negotiating committee repeatedly contacted the UN offices in Damascus to request assistance in negotiating with the government and oversight for the transfer, but received no response. Ultimately Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) staff members were on hand to assist with the transfer and some UN OCHA staff did arrive several hours late to bear witness.

A portion of the people from Darayya were taken to the government-controlled town of Hirjilleh, which has essentially become a government holding and processing center. This group included civilians, and most of the women and children. The remaining group, including fighters, their

families, citizen journalists, and others who did not want to reconcile with the government, were transported to opposition-controlled Idlib. It is notable that the armed groups in Darayya were composed entirely of local men, and neither ISIS nor JFS fighters were present in the town. The town itself has been almost completely destroyed, with very few buildings remaining intact in the central portion that was under siege the longest. Darayya has been removed from the Siege Watch besieged list entirely since it is now empty.

Follow up communications indicate that some people sent to Hirjilleh were processed and released, but several hundred remain. The displaced people still in Hirjilleh are difficult to contact as they are under government control and surveillance, even when speaking with visiting journalists. Though they are provided with services in Hirjilleh, they are not free to leave and were required to give up their identification documents to the military for processing. Many of those who were released remained in the Rural Damascus area. There have been reports of several women being arrested when attempting to travel to Idlib to join their husbands.

Moadamiya – Conditions in Moadamiya remained relatively stable throughout the reporting period, with tense ongoing negotiations between the local negotiating committee and the Syrian military. As in other besieged areas, the negotiations were notable for the use of threats, misinformation, and changing terms. At various points, residents were told that those who would be transferred would be sent to Jarablus near the Turkish border, Khan al-Shieh (which is increasingly under siege and heavy bombardment), and to ISIS-controlled parts of the country like Raqqa. According to Siege Watch reporting sources, the negotiations were overseen by Russian representatives, who reportedly wanted to avoid another “Darayya,” which had drawn significant negative international attention and accusations of ethnic cleansing.¹² When it was determined that a significant proportion of the population wanted to leave Moadamiya, residents were threatened that if more than half of them opted to leave, pro-government forces would “burn Moadamiya and kill the rest”¹³ of the people left behind.

In a notable incident, on 14 October, a dispute between the public and a member of the negotiating committee ended in violence when the committee member – a man named Mohamad Naeem Rajab – threw a grenade into the crowd, killing three people and injuring many. It is believed that he then fled Moadamiya by bribing his way out of the town. This incident highlights the tension and insecurity felt by residents unsure of their fate during the erratic negotiations process after the fall of nearby Darayya.

On 17 October, the Moadamiya negotiating committee capitulated to the government’s truce terms, without securing promises for the release of detainees. The citizens and members of the negotiations committee felt they had no choice, facing threats of annihilation like Darayya, which had been their closest neighbor under siege since 2012. On 19 October the population transfers began. Fighters, their families, as well as others deemed unacceptable by the government such as citizen journalists and members of the local council, were transported to opposition-controlled Idlib. The forcible transfer of the more savvy and connected citizens along with the fighters has left the community more vulnerable to future abuse. The estimated number of people who left is approximately 3,000 total. Moadamiya had repeatedly requested UN monitoring of truce

12 Karim El-Bar, “Ethnic cleansing on an unprecedented scale’: Rebels, UN criticise Assad tactics,” Middle East Eye, 5 September 2016, <<http://www.middleeasteye.net>>; Nazih Osseiran, “Syrians begin evacuating from symbolic Damascus suburb,” Financial Times, 26 August 2016, <<https://www.ft.com>>.

13 Siege Watch questionnaire response.



Forcible population transfer from Moadamiya, 19 October 2016



Forcible population transfer from Darayya, 26 August 2016



Aid to Moadamiya rendered unfit for consumption, 18 October 2016

negotiations over the past few years without result. In this final stage they requested but did not receive UN oversight for the population transfer, although SARC volunteers were present to assist. After the surrender agreement the town initially remained under partial siege, with easing restrictions on goods and movement. Electricity was restored to Moadamiya the night before the population transfer for the first time in years. In smaller subsequent population transfers, approximately 500 families of people from Darayya who had been stuck in Moadamiya were also transferred to the government processing area in Hirjilleh.

Before the surrender Moadamiya had only received one successful UN humanitarian aid delivery during the August-October reporting period. On 22 September, Moadamiya received a 23-truck UN interagency aid convoy carrying food, winter clothing, and nutritional supplements. This convoy arrived four days after an earlier convoy attempted to reach the area, but government forces from the Fourth Armored Division tampered with its contents at the inspection checkpoint. Some of the aid was reportedly stolen, and the rest was rendered unfit for human consumption by being mixed with glass and dirt. It received an additional humanitarian aid convoy in October immediately after the forced population transfer.

If these improved conditions persist, Moadamiya will remain on the besieged list for a three month observation period, after which time it will be downgraded to the "Watchlist." In the meantime Moadamiya's Tier level has been downgraded as it is no longer a high intensity siege. *[Note: In November, after the end of the reporting period, conditions appeared to be normalizing further in Moadamiya. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates.]*

Watchlist:

Khan al-Shieh is a Palestinian refugee “camp” in southwest Rural Damascus governorate. The town and rural farming areas around it have been partially besieged by Syrian government forces for more than two years, with a dangerous rural farm road to the nearby town of Al-Zakiya serving as the sole lifeline for thousands of remaining residents. Those who attempt to make the dangerous journey to procure supplies risk being shot by snipers. The situation in Khan al-Shieh deteriorated significantly over the reporting period as a result of intensified Russian and Syrian airstrikes, barrel bombs, shelling, and sniping by pro-government forces, along with decreased access to basic goods.



Fires caused by incendiary attacks on Khan al-Shieh, 9 October 2016

The increase of violence against the camp that began in May intensified throughout the current reporting period. On 28 September an UNRWA girls' school was directly hit with mortar shells.¹⁴ On 01 October, pro-government forces launched an offensive aimed at taking control of the Khan al-Shieh camp and its surrounding areas. The attacks were some of the most intense the area had experienced since the start of the conflict. On 9 October, Russian airstrikes hit the camp with incendiary munitions that caused large fires to break out in a civilian residential area.¹⁵ On 25 October, Russian airstrikes hit residential buildings with what appeared to be bunker buster munitions. At the beginning of October, access to Khan al-Shieh became exceedingly perilous. Although some attempts at smuggling and escape on the Zakiya Road continue, the camp is for all practical purposes, cut off. Khan al-Shieh's Palestinian residents are generally not supportive of armed opposition groups, which stay in the surrounding rural areas. As was the case in prior periods, the camp did not receive any direct UNRWA assistance.

¹⁴ "UNRWA Condemns Shelling of Khan Esheih School in Syria," UNRWA, 29 September 2016, <<http://www.unrwa.org/>>.

¹⁵ "TSI Syria Updates: October 10, 2016," The Syria Institute, <<http://syriainstitute.org/>>.



Protest in Khan al Shieh, 11 October 2016

Furthermore, UNRWA halted support to schools in the camp as a result of the intensified violence during the reporting period. On 11 October, residents held a sit-in protest outside of the UNRWA headquarters health services building calling on UNRWA to reopen schools and services.

While it is still on the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” Khan al-Shieh has been under observation for reclassification since 01 October. If conditions do not improve it will be moved to the besieged list on 01 January 2017. *[Note: Following the end of the reporting period, the UN officially recognized Khan al-Shieh as besieged on 1 November. In late November the town finally conceded to government surrender terms. Population transfers to Idlib started on 29 November for several thousand people.]*

OTHER RURAL DAMASCUS

Table 4:

Other Rural Damascus Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Madaya/Baqeen	1	Syrian Govt.	41,000
Zabadani	1	Syrian Govt.	200
SUM:			41,200

Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions worsened significantly in Madaya and Zabadani although there were no changes to Tier level. Small changes to population estimates as a result of displacement.

Conditions in the “Watchlist” communities of al-Hameh, Qudsaya, and Wadi Barada fluctuated during the period due to severe government negotiation tactics including violent attacks and supply restrictions.

Details:

Madaya and Zabadani remained critically besieged by Hezbollah, Iraqi militiamen, and Syrian government forces, with conditions deteriorating over the reporting period. The Baqeen area, which is an outlying suburb of Madaya, is considered as part of Madaya for reporting purposes. These areas received only one shipment of international humanitarian assistance over the reporting period, and sniper attacks increased. The “Four Towns Agreement” completely broke down towards the end of October, ending further negotiations for aid and medical evacuations in return for parallel measures in the government-controlled towns of Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib.

Humanitarian conditions declined significantly during the past quarter, and contacts reported that acute malnutrition once again became a major problem by early September. Many basic goods were unavailable and those that could be found were too expensive for most people to afford. There were reports of several young people attempting suicide during the past quarter,

although specific figures were not available.

One UN interagency aid convoy managed to reach Madaya and Zabadani during the reporting period on 25 September. A total of 49 aid trucks reached Madaya with supplies for 38,000 people, and four trucks reached Zabadani. The Madaya shipment included basic food supplies and non-essential medical items, but lacked necessary goods such as fuel, critical medical supplies, protein, baby milk, and salt (which is used as a preservative). Several small evacuations were negotiated for severe medical cases from Madaya in return for evacuations from Fuaa. Three such medical evacuations occurred in August, for a total of 40 patients.¹⁶ One small evacuation of four meningitis patients occurred in early September, and another small evacuation of 8 people total took place from Madaya and Fuaa on 06 October. After this last medical evacuation, the “Four Towns Agreement” completely broke down and all negotiations ceased. Contacts were not clear on the reason for the suspension but made it clear that the Iranian intermediary had ended communications with the local negotiating committee.

On 27 October, the only remaining medical point in Madaya announced that it was ceasing all activities due to lack of supplies. The following day a 10-year old boy named Mohammad al-Maleh fell off of a roof, reportedly after being startled by the sound of a sniper, and incurred a critical head injury. He later died when he could not be evacuated for treatment. There were approximately 27 kidney failure patients trapped in Madaya at the end of the reporting period that were unable to receive dialysis treatment due to the lack of supplies. In addition to malnutrition, highly contagious bacterial meningitis is widespread and there are no infant vaccines available.

The number of civilian shootings by Hezbollah snipers increased during the reporting period. The snipers are stationed in buildings near the al-Asali checkpoint that overlooks the town. The snipers target anyone within range including civilians. In early August, a 9-year old girl was shot in the leg; the wound became infected and required medical evacuation. On 11 August, a 70-year old woman was shot and killed. Mourners at her funeral were later targeted by the snipers as well.

Throughout the reporting period there were periodic reports of Hezbollah forcibly displacing people who lived outside of the southern border of the besieged area of Madaya. For example, approximately 40 families were forcibly displaced and moved into besieged area of Madaya on 19 October. One potential rationale for this is that some people in these areas had been helping the besieged civilians smuggle food. There is also a widespread belief that this part of the country is the focus of demographic engineering efforts, aimed at permanently securing the border regions for the Assad coalition by replacing the native populations with pro-Hezbollah and pro-Assad Shia populations. There were also reports of Hezbollah forces burning land around Madaya to further isolate the town.

In August, Hezbollah forces made an attempt to capture the water springs that feed Madaya and Zabadani. They were repelled by Ahrar al-Sham fighters, but an estimated five civilians were killed and seven were injured in the fighting. *[Note: After the end of the reporting period, during*

16 UN Security Council, S/2016/796, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 16 September 2016, <<http://www.un.org/>>.



9-year old girl shot by sniper in Madaya, 10 August 2016

the first two weeks of November, at least four infants in Madaya died of malnutrition-related causes. Additionally, two kidney failure patients died due to the lack of dialysis treatments exacerbated by malnutrition. These deaths are an indication that widespread acute starvation has begun to take hold.]

Watchlist:

Al-Hameh and Qudsaya are located in Rural Damascus countryside, in the mountainous areas to the north and west of Damascus city. The combined estimated population of these communities is approximately 235,000, many of whom are internally displaced persons (IDPs) previously uprooted from other besieged communities in the Damascus area. They became encircled by pro-government forces in July 2015, and continued to face siege-like conditions for most of the August-October reporting period.

The relative calm and stability that Qudsaya and al-Hameh experienced under their longstanding truces with the Syrian government ended during the reporting period, when pro-government forces unexpectedly began violent attacks against the cities. These attacks began on 24 September and more than 50 civilians were killed in the intensive airstrikes, missiles, and barrel bombs that followed. The violence was accompanied by severe movement restrictions and service cutoffs, leading to a spike in the cost of goods. By mid-October, both communities surrendered to government truce terms including the registration and removal of local armed groups members and the handover of all medium and heavy weapons. From the 13-15 October, fighters and their families from al-Hameh and Qudsaya were loaded onto government buses and transported to opposition-controlled Idlib governorate. An estimated total of 1,000-2,000 people were transferred in all. As in other communities, UN oversight was requested but not received, although SARC personnel were present to assist in the transfer.



Qudsaya residents board bus during forcible transfer to Idlib, 13 October 2016

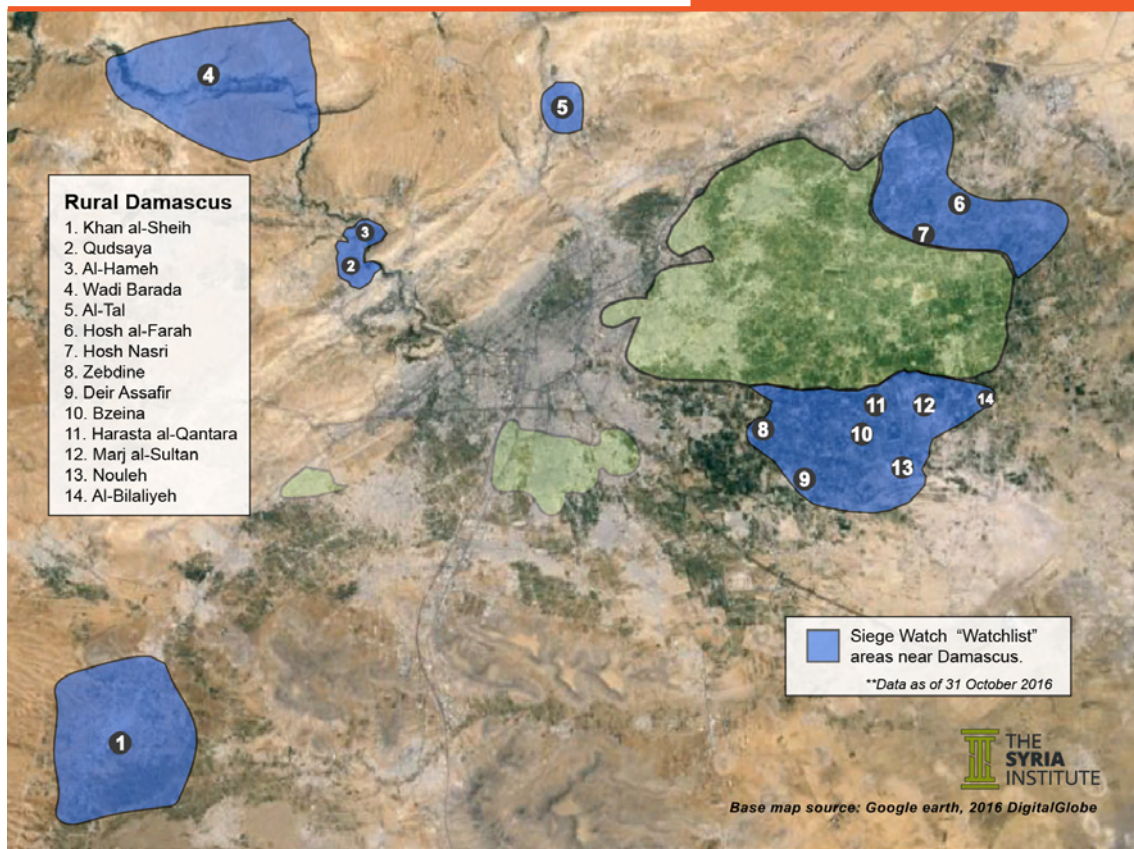
Following the population transfer, conditions in Qudsaya and al-Hameh gradually improved for the remaining residents. Freedom of movement was restored and some families that previously fled the area have returned. Humanitarian supplies were delivered and the availability and prices of goods began normalizing. The Syrian military forces now exercise complete control over both towns, and have set up internal checkpoints between the neighborhoods. If conditions remain stable Qudsaya and al-Hameh will be removed from the Siege Watch “Watchlist” list during the next quarter.

Al-Tal is located in the mountainous areas of Rural Damascus to the northwest of Damascus city. It has an estimated population of 800,000, many of whom are IDPs previously uprooted from other besieged communities in the Damascus area. Al-Tal first became encircled by pro-government forces in July 2015, and continues to face some siege-like conditions. Al-Tal continues to negotiate truce terms with the Syrian government and is still on the Siege Watch “Watchlist.”

Wadi Barada – The Wadi Barada area encompasses a string of small towns along the Barada River in the Ein Elfijeh, Zabadani, and Qudsaya subdistricts of Rural Damascus governorate, to the northwest of Damascus city. The area - which effectively controls the water supply to Damascus city - had previously been under a longstanding local truce with the Syrian government. Wadi Barada, and other areas like it, are increasingly at risk. During the August-October reporting period the situation remained tense, with intermittent attacks and fluctuations in the level of goods allowed to enter. Overall humanitarian conditions in the Wadi Barada are poor and the area lacks sufficient food, fuel, and medical supplies. Contacts noted the spread of Guillain-Barré Syndrome, an autoimmune disease sometimes triggered by infection, with

Map 3:

Watchlist Communities in Rural Damascus



at least five deaths and 30 patients infected. By the end of October, much of Wadi Barada was experiencing access restrictions so severe that they prompted local authorities to issue a distress call for humanitarian assistance from the international community.

The Wadi Barada area was added to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" in late July after Hezbollah and Syrian government forces closed all access points to the area attempted to gain control of the springs. The violence caused significant internal displacement within Wadi Barada. Though access restrictions were later loosened, conditions continued to fluctuate through the reporting period and the area remains on the "Watchlist."

Homs

Map 4:
Besieged Communities in Homs

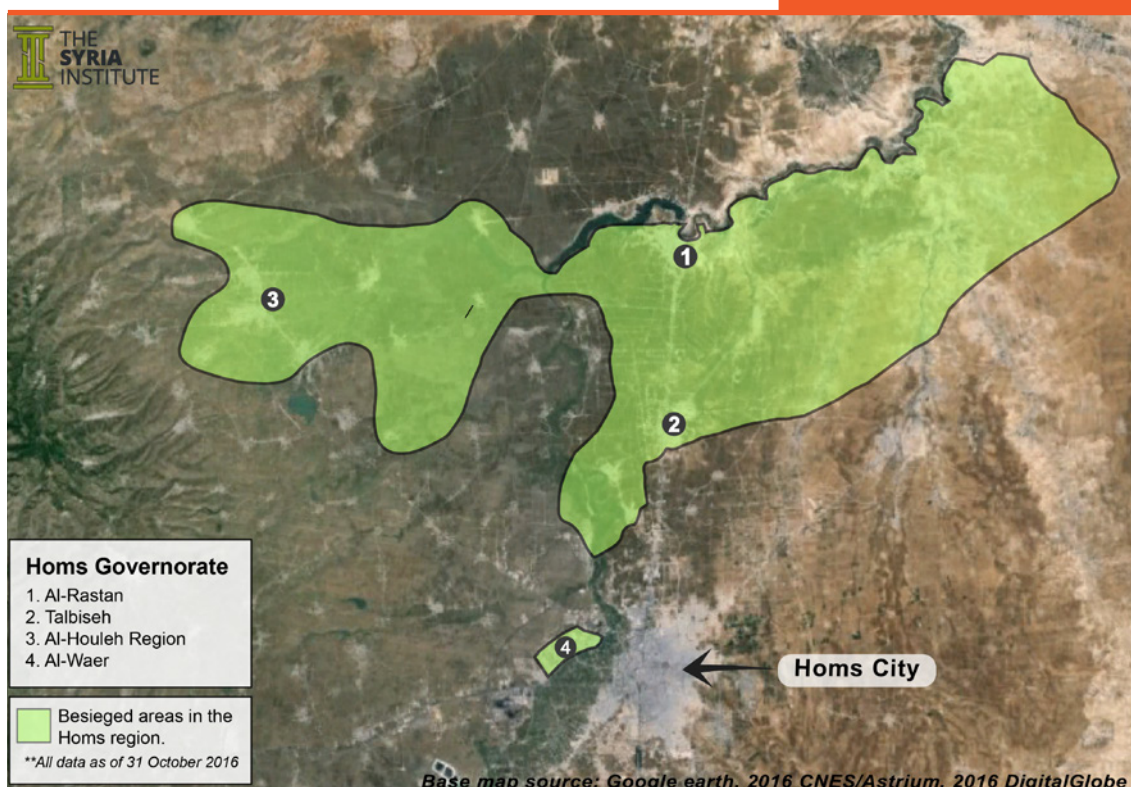


Table 5:
Homs Governorate Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Waer	1	Syrian Govt.	75,000
Al-Houleh Region +	3	Syrian Govt.	83,000
Al-Rastan +	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
Talbiseh +	3	Syrian Govt.	74,000
SUM:			347,000

*Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 31 October 2016.

Snapshot:

The situation in al-Waer remains critical and unstable. The population estimate has been lowered a result of forcible transfers to northern Homs. Population estimates in al-Rastan and Talbiseh have been raised accordingly. Conditions in the besieged enclaves of the northern

Homs countryside remain poor but stable.

Details:

All of the sieges in Homs remained in place during the reporting period. These sieges are enforced by the Syrian armed forces, Syrian National Defense Force militias, and a number of foreign pro-government forces including Afghan militias, Iraqi militias, Hezbollah, and Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces.

NORTHERN HOMS GOVERNORATE

Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh are all relatively large areas with agricultural land. They are able to rely on local food production and smuggling routes, and are more difficult for the pro-government forces to besiege at a high level of intensity. As with the prior reporting period, conditions in the besieged communities of northern Homs fluctuated throughout the quarter. Besieging forces continued their efforts to take control of smuggling routes and roads between besieged communities, and to destroy civilian services and infrastructure, but no changes to tier level were deemed necessary. None of the besieged communities in the northern countryside of Homs have ever been designated as besieged by the UN.

Medical supplies and baby milk are among the hardest items to obtain in all of the rural besieged areas of Homs governorate. Malnutrition is widespread, and those with chronic diseases struggle to find treatment. There are still no ceasefire negotiations with the Syrian government for any of these areas.

Al-Rastan and Talbiseh are adjoining pockets in the northern Homs countryside, which remain surrounded by pro-government forces in the form of a mixture of local and foreign militias. A single perilous path connects these areas to the al-Houleh siege pocket to the west. Humanitarian conditions in both remained relatively unchanged from the previous period.

Both enclaves continued to be intermittently targeted with airstrikes by Syrian and Russian aircraft, in addition to shelling and sniping by pro-government militia forces. At least 30 attacks with incendiary munitions were reported during the August-October reporting period. People forcibly displaced from al-Waer and nearby rural villages were transported into al-Rastan and Talbiseh, leading to an increase in the estimated population for both areas.

From 15 – 17 September, Talbiseh was targeted daily with shelling, barrel bombs, and intense Russian airstrikes with cluster munitions. The attacks paused on the evening of the 18th and the day of the 19th for a UN interagency aid convoy to reach Talbiseh and distribute humanitarian assistance. After the aid trucks departed, attacks on Talbiseh resumed. This was the only aid convoy to reach Talbiseh during the reporting period.

Al-Rastan area was scheduled to receive UN humanitarian assistance in late September, but the convoy was aborted when Russian airstrikes targeted the convoy route, and has not been attempted since. Al-Rastan did not receive any UN humanitarian assistance during the reporting period. Garbage is reportedly piling up as the local council does not have the capacity to collect it, leading to the spread of diseases like Leishmaniasis – a parasitic disease spread by flies.

With the start of the school year, people in al-Rastan reported that Syrian and Russian airstrikes targeting schools intensified. Currently there are only two functional schools left in the area, and

many families have stopped sending their children out of fear of the strikes. On the night of 2 October, Russian airstrikes hit residential areas of al-Rastan with incendiary munitions.

Al-Houleh - Conditions in the al-Houleh region remained relatively unchanged during the reporting period. Airstrikes by Syrian and Russian jets along with shelling by pro-government militias caused civilian casualties throughout the quarter. For example, in the middle of the night on 1 October, airstrikes hit a residential area in the town of Kafarlaha, injuring seven civilians. The single remaining dirt road that connects al-Houleh to the al-Rastan and Talbiseh pockets was frequently targeted by pro-government forces in surrounding villages – especially from the Kafnana checkpoint – leading to frequent road closures. During the reporting period, several people were allowed to cross the checkpoint to exit the besieged area near Dar al-Kabira and were reportedly arrested by government forces. Their whereabouts remain unknown.



Food aid is offloaded in al-Houleh, 31 August 2016

Al-Houleh received two UN interagency humanitarian aid shipments during the reporting period: on 31 August a 26-truck convoy entered with basic food supplies, school supplies, and one truck containing medication. It received an additional aid convoy on 24 October. The area is in desperate need of medical supplies, and people with illnesses such as cancer continued to die during the reporting period, without the ability to access treatment. Notably, in mid-September there were protests in al-Houleh against forced displacement.



Children protest forcible displacement in al-Houleh, 27 September 2016

AL-WAER

Al-Waer - The al-Waer district of Homs experienced significant turmoil during the August-October reporting period, as government forces and pro-government militias continued to try and push the neighborhood to abandon earlier negotiation terms that included a demand for the release of political prisoners. As in other besieged areas, the government negotiators have done this through a mixture of intense military escalation, threats, misinformation, and aid restriction. Humanitarian conditions in al-Waer remain critical.

In the beginning of the reporting period, al-Waer was under extreme duress from pro-government forces relentlessly bombarding the besieged district in an effort to force it to surrender.¹⁷ Some of the notable attacks:

- ◆ The al-Birr hospital, which treated dialysis, obstetrics, and intensive care patients, was damaged by shelling from pro-government forces on 19 August. It was targeted again 10 days later.
- ◆ On 26 and 27 August a particularly fierce period of attacks with more than 39 airstrikes killed approximately 23 civilians and caused more than 120 injuries.
- ◆ On the 27 August, 15 air raids targeted civilian homes along with shelling and mortars, and al-Waleed hospital was bombed. Incendiary munitions were used in some of the strikes.

¹⁷ Siege Watch Tweet, 18 August 2016, <<https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/766281369131548674>>; Siege Watch Tweet, 18 August 2016, <<https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/766281963238002688>>.



Smoke rises from al-Birr hospital after attack, 19 August 2016



Four-year old Firas was injured in al-Waer incendiary attack, 27 August 2016

As the medical situation continued to deteriorate there were reports of spreading tuberculosis in al-Waer. SARC reportedly offered to evacuate people out of al-Waer for treatment instead of bringing treatment in, but fearing for their safety, patients rejected this plan. On 11 August, the local council issued a distress call to international organizations, warning that the al-Waleed hospital would shortly run out of supplies and only had enough fuel to run generators for another 24 hours. Without electricity, residents in al-Waer lack treatment for conditions like kidney disease, incubators for infants, and machines needed for surgery.

The peak of attacks and threats of mass killing in August coupled with the emergency humanitarian conditions pushed the local negotiating committee to make concessions to the government. By 1 September the negotiating committee worked out a plan with the government to return to an earlier ceasefire deal. Though there was little trust that the government would negotiate in good faith,¹⁸ the severe military escalation forced the people of al-Waer to accept conditions previously considered unacceptable. This restart of the ceasefire plan allowed the entry of limited amounts of basic goods: vegetables, fruits, sugar, tea, oil, margarine, and canned food. It also allowed some families to move through the checkpoint, and five medical cases were evacuated for treatment. More families were reportedly moved to the northern Homs countryside, as had been done for the past several months in small batches by government forces. These transfers are considered forcible because they were done under extreme duress, with the only remaining choices being surrender or die.

In late September, a batch of approximately 250 fighters and their families were forcibly transferred from al-Waer to the besieged northern Homs countryside. followed by another transfer of around 100 fighters and their families. As in other besieged areas, the local negotiating committee requested, but did not receive, oversight from the UN during the transfer. In return, the government released 194 detainees, most of whom were reportedly not on the list of more than 7,000 detainees previously agreed upon for release.

Al-Waer was reached on several occasions by UN interagency aid convoys during the reporting period: on 23-25 August, on 24 September, and on 26 October. These convoys did not contain the most critically needed supplies and failed to make a substantial change in the humanitarian conditions as the neighborhood remained under intense siege. There were several smaller additional food basket distributions from non-UN aid brought in during the implementation of the ceasefire. At the very end of October, government forces once again increased access restrictions. *[Note: In November, after the end of the reporting period, the negotiations broke down when the local committee refused to submit the names of fighters unless the government followed through on its promise to provide information on detainees. Al-Waer is once again being subjected to intense airstrikes and attacks.]*

¹⁸ See prior Siege Watch report

Deir Ezzor

Map 5:

Besieged Neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor

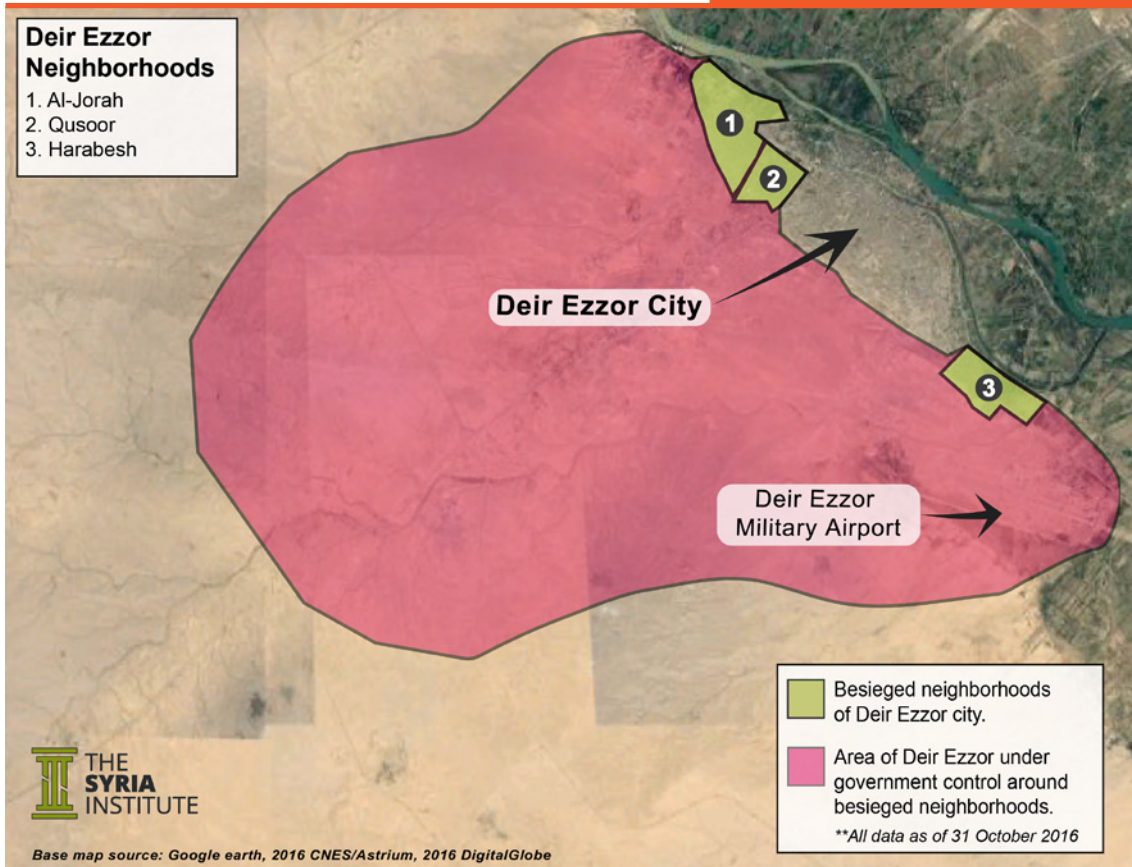


Table 6:

Deir Ezzor Besieged Neighborhoods

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Deir Ezzor (besieged neighborhoods)	3	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	80,000

Snapshot:

No significant changes during the August-October reporting period. Humanitarian conditions remain poor but stable.

Details:

Over the past quarter, there have been no notable changes in the situation in the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city. The WFP continues to airdrop food supplies to the besieged

neighborhoods several times a week. The neighborhoods are surrounded by ISIS forces, and are controlled internally by Syrian government forces, which regulate humanitarian aid distribution and restrict civilians from fleeing the neighborhoods. As a result, many people consider themselves to be besieged by both ISIS and the government.

Each WFP airdrop contains an average of 26 pallets of supplies, which generally include basic food aid such as rice, salt, lentils, and nutritional supplements. On occasion, fighting between the Syrian military and ISIS forces near the designated airdrop zones delayed deliveries. In mid-August, the WFP and Syrian Arab Red Crescent airdropped 4.6 tons of medical aid, the first to be delivered since the siege began. Still, at least three civilians, one of whom was a child, died during the reporting period as a result of the shortage of medical supplies. The status of the medical sector in the besieged neighborhoods remains poor. Fuel shortages make it difficult to pump and filter potable water and to run bakeries, leading to bread and water shortages.

Reports of ongoing issues with the deliveries noted in prior reports persisted during the reporting period. There continue to be problems with the aid distribution as some of the WFP food baskets intended for civilian beneficiaries are confiscated by Syrian forces and militias and are either used for military personnel or sold in local markets. As reported in the prior period, Syrian and Russian airdrops of supplies continued outside of the WFP program. These supplies are generally for commercial purposes, and are sold by government-affiliated merchants in local markets. Limited smuggling still occurs, in which government-affiliated merchants coordinate with Syrian military officers to bring in goods through ISIS-controlled through the areas.

A new government security chief named Hasan al-Mohammad was sent to Deir Ezzor in August. He reportedly revoked all permissions for travel, with the exception of people with government connections. As a result, compared to the prior reporting period, few citizens were able to pay the high fee in return for transportation by government helicopter between August-October.

Besieged civilians continue to endure intermittent shelling during ISIS attacks on the government-controlled neighborhoods, and dozens of civilian casualties were reported. The Syrian military continues its aggressive conscription tactics, which prevent many families from even attempting to bribe their way out of the besieged area for fear that any men over the age of 14 will be forced into the army. Young men are reportedly afraid to leave their homes for fear of being forcibly conscripted and sent to the front lines with little training.

Despite these challenges, humanitarian conditions in Deir Ezzor are markedly better than in many other besieged communities due to the sustained WFP-led aid efforts. As a result, Deir Ezzor remains classified at Tier level 3 – the lowest intensity of siege.

Map 6:
Besieged Communities of Idlib

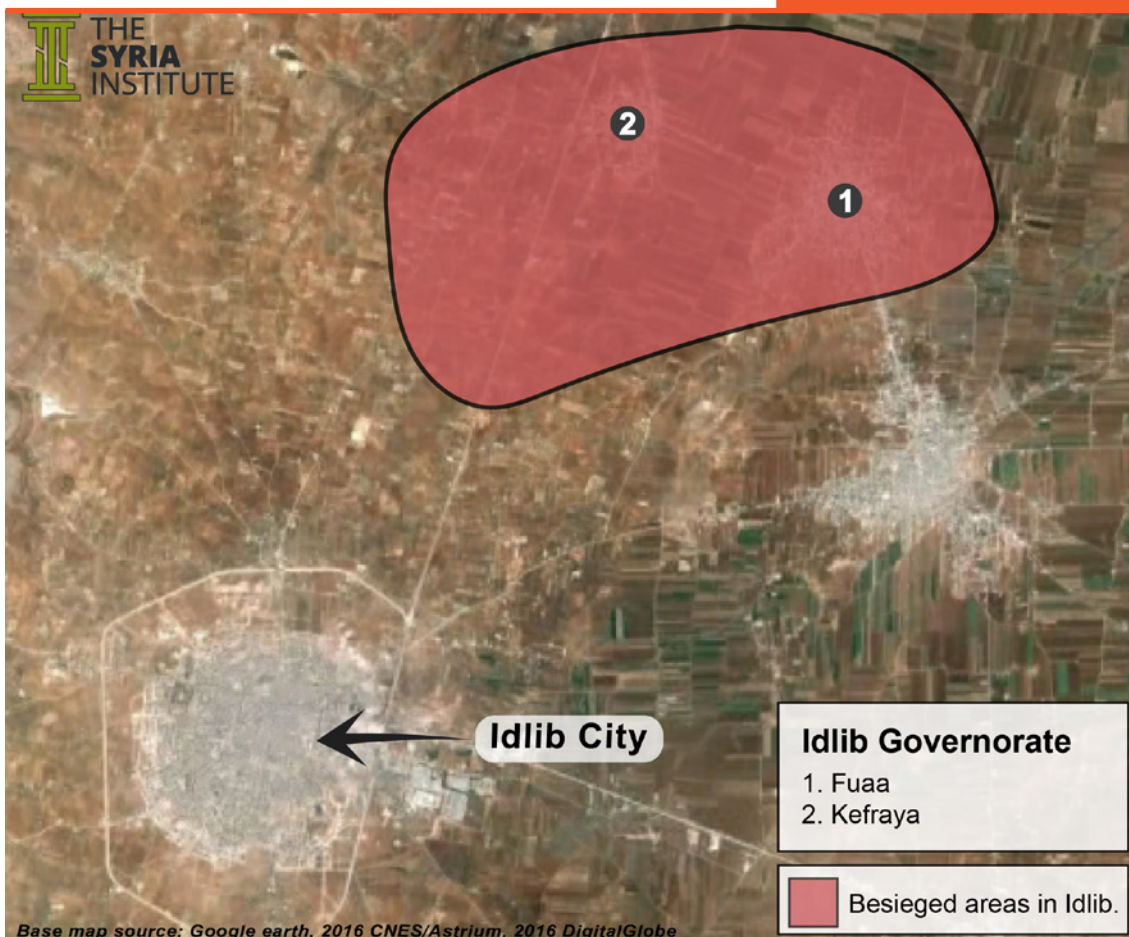


Table 7:
Idlib Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Fuaa and Kefraya	3	Armed groups	20,000

Snapshot:

No change in besieged designation or tier level.

Details:

Fuaa and Kefraya – The pro-government towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remain besieged by Syrian opposition groups and JFS throughout the August-October reporting period. Siege

Watch was unable to expand its network of reporting contacts into these communities during the reporting period.

Fuaa and Kefraya were part of the “Four Towns Agreement,” in which they received reciprocal aid deliveries and evacuations along with opposition-controlled Madaya and Zabadani. One UN interagency aid convoy reached Fuaa and Kefraya during the reporting period on 25 September.¹⁹ There were also several small evacuations negotiated for severe medical cases from Fuaa in return for evacuations from Madaya in Rural Damascus governorate. Three such evacuations happened in August, for a total of 40 patients.²⁰ A smaller evacuation took place in early September, and another small evacuation of eight people total took place for Madaya and Fuaa on 06 October. After this the “Four Towns Agreement” completely broke down, and all negotiations were cut off.

Despite the lack of international humanitarian assistance, Fuaa and Kefraya have been receiving regular airdrops of humanitarian supplies and military assistance from the Syrian government.²¹ Accordingly, living conditions in the two towns have remained stable.

19 UN Security Council, S/2016/873, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 18 October 2016, <<http://www.un.org>>.

20 UN Security Council, S/2016/796, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 16 September 2016, <<http://www.un.org>>.

21 SANA, 6 November 2016, <http://sana.sy/?p=455795>; Step News Agency, 04 October 2016, <http://stepagency-sy.net/archives/110456>.

Aleppo

Map 7:

Besieged areas of Aleppo, 31 July 2016

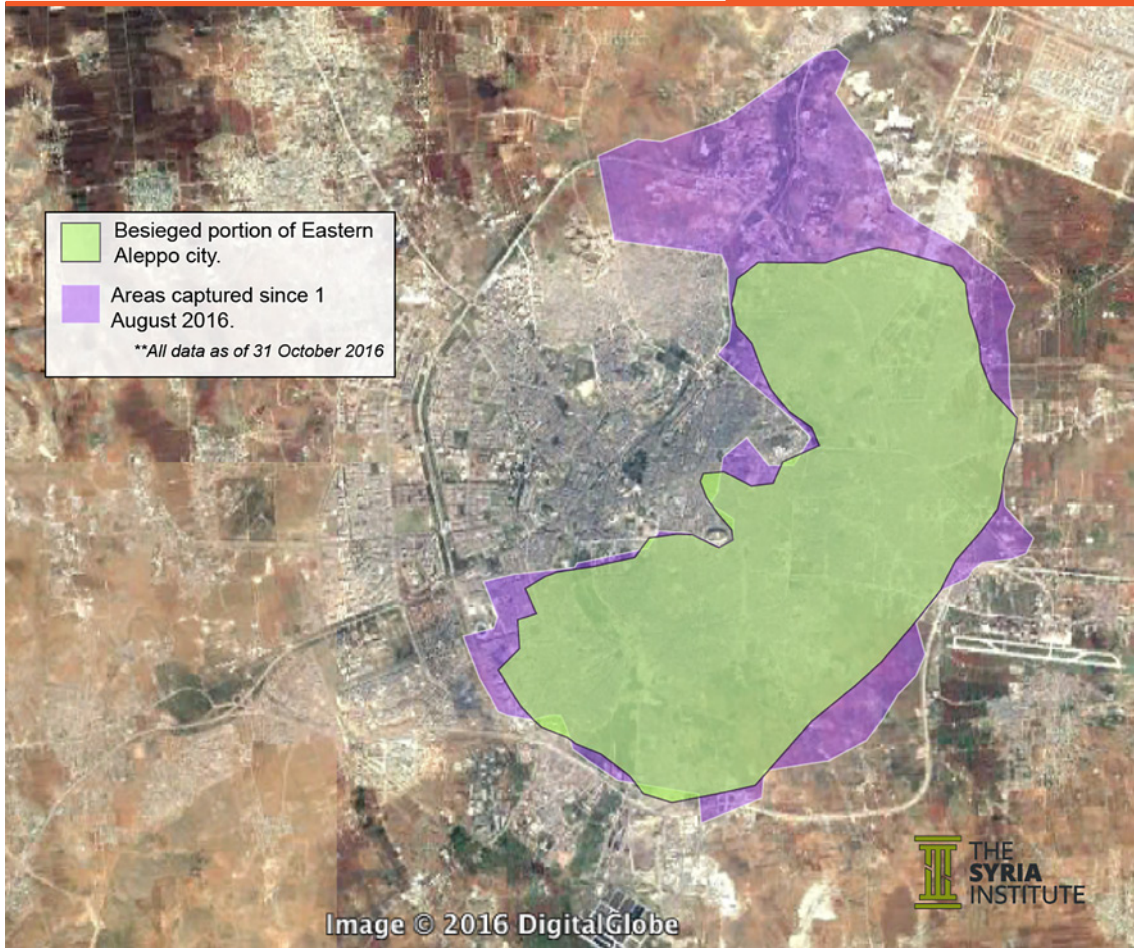


Table 8:

Eastern Aleppo Besieged Neighborhoods

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Eastern Aleppo	1	Syrian govt.	326,000

Snapshot:

The situation in the eastern opposition-controlled part of Aleppo city deteriorated significantly during the reporting period leading Siege Watch to officially designate the area as besieged in mid-October at the highest intensity Tier level. Conditions in eastern Aleppo were catastrophic by the end of October.

Details:

Eastern Aleppo has been on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” since February 2016, when fears began to rise that the Castello Road – the only remaining supply route into the area – could be severed by pro-government forces. In mid-July, access to eastern Aleppo was finally severed after weeks of fighting for control of the Castello Road, bringing the opposition-controlled portion under full siege by pro-government forces. Opposition forces briefly opened an alternative route through the Ramouseh area for ten days in early August, but no UN aid was sent in during that time and the opposition was ultimately defeated by pro-government forces, bringing eastern Aleppo under full siege with an estimated 326,000 people trapped inside. Siege Watch designated eastern Aleppo as besieged on 14 October 2016, after a three-month observation period.

Throughout most of the reporting period, eastern Aleppo was targeted by airstrikes from Russian and Syrian warplanes. Ground forces, consisting mainly of foreign pro-Assad militias, also targeted eastern Aleppo with artillery and shelling attacks. There have been reports of a wide variety of weapons used in attacks on eastern Aleppo including internationally banned cluster munitions, barrel bombs, bunker busters, incendiary munitions as well as attacks with chlorine gas.

An attempt to bring about a renewed ceasefire in September failed when the Syrian government announced a new offensive on 22 September, leading to an immediate increase in violence. Hundreds were killed in airstrikes over the next few days, and three of the four Civil Defence (White Helmets) centers were destroyed. On 18 October, Russia announced a unilateral “humanitarian pause” which provided a temporary reprieve from airstrikes, but ground fighting reportedly continued.²² No medical evacuations or humanitarian aid shipments were able to enter or exit eastern Aleppo during this time. At the end of October, armed opposition groups announced the start of a new offensive to break the siege from the western side, but these efforts quickly stalled.

UN international aid convoys were not able to reach eastern Aleppo during the reporting period due to the access restrictions and continuous attacks. In early August when opposition forces held tenuous control of the Ramouseh road, they were able to bring some supplies into eastern Aleppo in cooperation with international NGOs, but the instability prevented any large-scale operations. This brief influx of goods helped temporarily bring down prices, but the impact was short lived and prices of basic goods increased significantly towards the end of the reporting period as supply levels began to run low. As in other besieged urban areas, some people in Aleppo grow small gardens on rooftops or courtyards, but the amount of food produced is insufficient to meet the needs of even a fraction of the population, particularly with the onset of winter.

Eastern Aleppo had been long anticipating the possibility of a siege, and many local organizations had stockpiled approximately three months’ worth of critical food supplies. These stockpiles were running critically low towards the end of the reporting period, threatening the 326,000 people trapped inside with imminent starvation. Initial cases of malnutrition-related infant deaths began to be reported during the past quarter. The medical sector has been particularly devastated, with just over 30 doctors remaining and insufficient medical supplies left.

²² Reuters, “Syria says east Aleppo ceasefire has begun, promises ‘safe exit,’” Reuters, 21 October, 2016, <<http://www.reuters.com/>>.

During the reporting period, injuries sustained in violent attacks, chronic conditions, and the lack of available treatments led to a high death toll. The strategic targeting of civilian infrastructure had a significant negative impact on living conditions.

At the end of the reporting period, eastern Aleppo remained completely inaccessible. Civilians could not leave the area and humanitarian assistance could not enter. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation closely as it develops. *[Note: Following the end of the reporting period the situation continued to worsen. On 10 November the UN announced that the last stockpiled food supplies were being distributed to residents.²³ On 15 November the Syrian government began an intensive airstrike campaign. On 19 November, the last five operational hospitals in eastern Aleppo were taken out of service in airstrikes. On 19 and 20 November a series of suspected chlorine chemical attacks using barrel bombs were reported, one of which killed a family of six. By the end of November pro-government forces had made inroads into the besieged neighborhoods, and tens of thousands were displaced. Amidst the humanitarian catastrophe there were reports of hundreds of east Aleppo residents being detained by government forces.]*

²³ "Transcript of press stakeout by Mr. Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria," UN, 10 November 2016, <<http://reliefweb.int>>.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this Siege Watch report – the fourth in a quarterly series compiling information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas in Syria – indicate a dark turning point in the saga of Syria's sieges. As the Syrian government and its allies race to neutralize the sieges through force, coercion, and displacement, the humanitarian crisis is reaching new depths for many of the estimated 1,326,175 people trapped in at least 39 communities across the country.

Of the more than 1.3 million people living under siege:

- ◆ 91% of the besieged Syrians in approximately 34 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 7.5% of the besieged Syrians in three communities are besieged by a mixture of the Syrian government and armed groups. In Deir Ezzor the siege is primarily enforced by ISIS, while the Syrian government imposes further access restrictions from the inside. In the southern Damascus suburbs, the primary siege is imposed by the Syrian government, but ISIS and other armed groups impose further access restrictions to Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad inside the siege.
- ◆ 1.5% of the besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate.

More than 1.1 million additional people in the Siege Watch “Watchlist” areas face harsh conditions and are at serious risk of becoming completely besieged. All of the “Watchlist” communities are threatened with full siege by the Syrian government and its allies.

At the current time, the Syrian government and its allies appear to be more convinced than ever that they can have a military victory, and have shifted their strategy towards besieged areas from “surrender or starve” to “surrender or die.” As a result, the past quarter was notable for its military escalations, community surrenders, and the forcible transfers.

Living conditions for besieged Syrians have continued to deteriorate. In October, eastern Aleppo was reclassified from “Watchlist” to fully besieged and appeared to be on the brink of collapse. Towards the end of the reporting period and into early November, the intense bombings created catastrophic humanitarian conditions reminiscent of Darayya, with the notable difference that Darayya had less than 3% of the population currently trapped in eastern Aleppo. The scale of the disaster in eastern Aleppo is so great that it is difficult to fathom the full consequences if the current slaughter is allowed to continue unchecked. In September, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that Aleppo was “worse than a slaughterhouse,” comparing it to Srebrenica and Rwanda.²⁴

In Eastern Ghouta, attacks increased significantly during the reporting period. Continued territorial gains by pro-government forces caused further displacement and deprived the area of arable land – an important coping mechanism. The use of internationally banned weapons such as cluster munitions, as well as the targeting of civilians, was rampant. The current trajectory of the government’s military campaign appears designed to isolate the communities of Douma and Harasta from the rest of Eastern Ghouta and force them to surrender. Douma is already facing an emergency humanitarian crisis as the continuous attacks strain its ability to cope. It is one of four communities along with eastern Aleppo, Madaya, and al-Waer, that were approaching the brink of complete humanitarian disaster at the end of the Siege Watch reporting period and require urgent international attention.

The community of Darayya in Rural Damascus was completely destroyed in August and its entire population surrendered and was forcibly displaced. An addition community, Hosh Nasri in the Eastern Ghouta area of Rural Damascus was captured in a military offensive during the reporting period and its entire population was displaced into other besieged communities in Eastern Ghouta.

The devastation wrought upon Darayya was used as a warning by the Syrian government and its allies to other besieged and semi-besieged communities as it pushed several of them to capitulate. Besieged Moadamiya, and the “Watchlist” areas of Qudsaya and al-Hameh all accepted government forced surrender terms during the reporting period. The communities were forced to accept government terms with little room for negotiation, and were punished with attacks and threats of annihilation when they tried to refuse. In all three areas, the terms have included the disarming of the towns and the forcible transfer of opposition fighters and their families, along with influential figures such as activists and local council members. These local

24 UN Security Council, S/2016/873, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 18 October 2016, <<http://www.un.org>>.

civilian leaders were important to the resilience of the besieged communities, and the fact that they were forcibly transferred leaves the communities significantly more vulnerable to future abuses. In all three of these cases, local negotiating committees repeatedly reached out to UN agencies in Damascus for assistance with the negotiations, particularly with oversight of the transfer processes. In all cases, their requests were denied, leaving them without an impartial observer to help document and potentially discourage abuses committed during the process. In some cases, similar requests have been made for years without result.

As a result of the truce/surrender agreements, Moadamiya, Qudsaya, and al-Hameh are all under evaluation for reclassification. If the conditions remain on their current trajectory, Moadamiya will be moved to the “Watchlist” and Qudsaya and al-Hameh will be considered “normalized” and will be removed from all Siege Watch project observation.

Douma, al-Waer, and several “Watchlist” areas that came under increasing attack during the reporting period, are all said to be in negotiations with the Syrian government. The terms of these agreements, if they are brought to fruition, will likely resemble those in Moadamiya, Qudsaya, and al-Hameh.

It is still too early to judge, but since these areas surrendered there have been substantial improvements in the humanitarian conditions, with access becoming unrestricted, prices normalizing, and some displaced families returning. At the same time tensions remain high in these communities that have “returned to the bosom of the nation,” and there have already been some red flags. In Qudsaya for example, men were promised a six-month grace period before they would be forced to join the military for their mandatory service, but there were reports that two weeks into November they were already being conscripted to be sent to the battle in Aleppo. The medical sector has not been fully re-established and there are reports of medical equipment actually being confiscated by pro-government forces. Checkpoints manned by pro-government forces have been erected inside the city between neighborhoods.

It should be noted that there were no ISIS or JFS fighters present in any of the areas that were forced to surrender over the August-October period. The only besieged area in the country where ISIS maintains a presence is in the southern suburbs of Damascus, where a small cadre of fighters control Hajar al-Aswad and parts of Yarmouk. These areas have been free from government attack for more than a year. In some of the larger besieged areas where JFS does have a presence, such as Eastern Ghouta, they make up a small fraction of the opposition forces. The entire siege strategy of the Syrian government, which has crystallized over the past 3-4 years, has been aimed at forcing the Syrian population – not just fighters – into submission. The government’s siege strategy has not been guided at all by the goal of fighting ISIS or JFS.

This focus on civilians is clearly demonstrated by the government’s widespread and systematic use of tactics that impact primarily the civilian population such as: denial of medical evacuations for civilians, the removal of supplies with no military value such as baby milk from aid convoys, clauses in local ceasefire agreements aimed at neutralizing civilian actors such as media activists, the intentional destruction of farmland, and the sustained targeting of civilian infrastructure including schools, hospitals, and markets. In this context the government’s resistance to allowing aid convoys into besieged areas is logical, as these convoys undermine the suffering imposed by the government on the civilian populations. It is a collective punishment for those communities under opposition control, to force them into surrender.

While UN humanitarian assistance continued to reach some besieged areas during the reporting period, it has had a negligible impact on living conditions. The sole exception is Deir Ezzor, which has received regular WFP aid airdrops since April, a condition that cannot be achieved in most other besieged areas. It is clear that convoy counting cannot solve the crisis of Syria's sieges. The UN continues to be denied access to critically besieged communities as civilians suffer and conditions worsen. There have been no consequences for the besiegers, and no sign of the airdrops that the UN and ISSG promised by 1 June if access did not improve.²⁵

In addition to violating UNSC Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015), the deliberate starvation of civilians is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and therefore a war crime. The forced population transfers that have increased over the past reporting period constitute another war crime.

UN Siege Reporting

In the monthly UN Secretary General (UNSG) Syria report to the Security Council covering the period of September 2016, the total estimated population of people living under siege was increased to 861,200 with the addition of eastern Aleppo.²⁶ Then, in the most recent UNSG report covering the October time period, the UN stated that "Following a comprehensive review by the United Nations, it was estimated that, as of 1 November, some 974,080 people were living in areas under siege, up from 861,200 in the previous report."²⁷ This is the highest figure ever recognized by the UN, but still falls short of the approximately 1.3 million currently monitored by the Siege Watch project.

This change in UN reporting reflects the recognition of approximately 16 additional locations in Rural Damascus governorate that are under siege by the Syrian government and its allies. All but one of the newly recognized locations have been besieged since 2013, and have been on the Siege Watch besieged list since the project's inception. The remaining area – Khan al-Shieh – is on the project's "Watchlist" and is currently within the three-month observation period for reclassification as besieged as laid out in the project's methodology.

Siege Watch has consistently called for more transparency, consistency, and objectivity in the UN's reporting on besieged communities, making the case that obscuring the extent of the situation on the ground did a disservice to those suffering under siege. Years of underreporting have distorted the international community's understanding of the conditions on the ground and potentially dampened the outcry and response. The failure to recognize besieged areas meant that alarm bells did not ring quickly enough to address some tragedies, and it prevented long-besieged areas from being prioritized for aid delivery earlier in the year when all 18 recognized locations were reached for the first time. Furthermore, the way in which conditions

25 Tom Miles and Stephanie Nebehay, "U.N. vows to airdrop Syria aid if needed, eyes renewed peace talks," Reuters <<http://www.reuters.com>>;

US Department of State, "Statement of the International Syria Support Group," May 17, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257295.htm>.

26 UN Security Council, S/2016/873, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),"

18 October 2016, <<http://www.un.org>>.

27 UN Security Council, S/2016/962, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),"

15 November 2016, <<http://www.un.org>>.

on the ground have been mischaracterized suggested that decisions were guided by political sensitivities instead of objective assessments. This has contributed to the growing resentment and distrust that many Syrians feel towards the UN agencies operating in Syria.

When Siege Watch first began monitoring besieged locations in November 2015, UN OCHA's official estimates only recognized 393,000 people living under siege in Syria. This underestimate failed to account for a significant number of long-term sieges in Homs, Damascus, and Rural Damascus governorates, and contradicted the UN OCHA's own criteria for "besieged." Since then, the Siege Watch project has consistently and transparently presented a more realistic estimation of the size and scope of besieged areas in Syria, and repeatedly called on UN OCHA to reassess its own designations.

Siege Watch welcomes the UN's review and recognition of long-besieged communities in Rural Damascus. This recognition of the much larger scale of sieges comes at a time when decisive action to prevent the collapse of eastern Aleppo, al-Waer, Madaya and Douma is necessary, and will hopefully contribute to generating momentum for an urgently needed international response. At the same time, the new classifications still fail to recognize the besieged areas of the northern Homs countryside. In the al-Houleh, al-Rastan, and Talbiseh areas, an estimated 272,000 people remain trapped under siege by government forces and pro-government militias. These areas were fully besieged in mid-2013 and continue to face restrictions on movement and access to humanitarian assistance. Repeated and ongoing attacks on civilian infrastructure have undermined the coping ability of the local population, which will face increasing danger this coming winter.

Recommendations

The crisis of besieged civilians in Syria reached new depths over the August-October reporting period, as increasingly violent attacks exacerbated the inhumane conditions that resulted from sustained denial of food, water, medical care, and electricity. The unimaginable brutality to which Darayya was subjected is currently being repeated in besieged areas across Syria, while the international community sits by and watches. PAX and TSI therefore recommend the following measures be taken:

- ◆ The international community, particularly the UNSC and the ISSG, must act now to prevent the critically besieged communities of eastern Aleppo, Douma, Madaya, and al-Waer from becoming the next Darayya, as they are all on the brink of complete collapse. In total an estimated 582,000 people live in these four communities. The stalemate at the UN Security Council does not relieve individual states from their duty as High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions to act to end war crimes.
- ◆ The goal of the UNSC, the ISSG, and member states should be to lift the sieges and allow the free movement of civilians in and out of besieged areas instead of focusing on one-off aid convoys. More political pressure must be brought to bear on all parties in the conflict, but in particular the Government of Syria and its allies, which are responsible for the vast majority of the sieges.

- ◆ UN OCHA and other relevant agencies should recognize the long-besieged communities of the northern Homs countryside. The UN should designate areas as besieged when the situation on the ground meets objective criteria based on needs assessments and data collection efforts. These determinations should be made independently of political considerations of UNSC and ISSG members or of parties to the conflict.
- ◆ Prioritization of areas for humanitarian aid convoys should be based on transparent and data-driven needs assessments. A tiered system such as the one used by the Siege Watch project, can help identify the areas of greatest need.
- ◆ Donors who support the aid efforts of UN agencies in Syria should continue to demand transparency in the designation process of the besieged areas. It is essential that UN OCHA's assessment, which informs the Security Council and the ISSG, be led by the facts on the ground and the needs of the people in besieged communities. Explanations should be provided when areas are moved to or from the list of besieged communities. Such transparency will help ensure that reporting mandated by the Security Council to verify implementation of four separate UNSC Resolutions is not being manipulated towards political or military ends.
- ◆ The UN agencies must commit to and follow through on monitoring the implementation of local ceasefire agreements when their presence is requested by one of the parties. Though the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has rightfully criticized these forced displacements,²⁸ when situations become so severe that communities are forced to capitulate, they face an extreme power imbalance during the implementation. The presence of international observers to monitor and document population transfers will help protect the civilians from further human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. It is increasingly clear that local negotiations need strong and principled UN stewardship.
- ◆ The UN must take a stronger approach to aid convoys and immediately cease the practice of allowing besieging forces to block certain amounts and types of aid to be delivered. Convoy approvals should not be considered as granting "access" so long as the approving party hinders delivery through other means, especially bombardments intended to punish or create fear among the civilian population. A cessation of attacks must be considered an integral part of the granting of aid access.
- ◆ UN agencies must monitor the distribution of their aid deliveries through third party local monitors, to ensure that aid reaches the intended beneficiaries. Continuing reports of abnormalities in aid distribution should be investigated by the WFP and international donors to ensure that humanitarian supplies are reaching the intended beneficiaries. Those responsible for diverting aid must be held accountable.

28 Nina Larson, "UN slams Syria 'strategy' of forced evacuation of besieged towns," AFP, 1 September 2016, <<https://www.yahoo.com/>>.

- ◆ Parties who continue to violate UN Security Council Resolutions and IHL with regards to besieged areas and hinder access are committing war crimes that may amount to crimes against humanity. Concrete steps to set up accountability mechanisms are needed urgently.

Annex I – Community List & Population Data

Table of Siege Watch
Besieged Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	1	Syrian Govt.	326,000
Damascus	Jobar	1	Syrian Govt.	225
	Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	3,500
	Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	8,000
Rural Damascus	Arbin	2	Syrian Govt.	55,000
	Zamalka	2	Syrian Govt.	13,000
	Beit Sawa	2	Syrian Govt.	11,250
	Eftreis	2	Syrian Govt.	5,000
	Ein Tarma	2	Syrian Govt.	9,500
	Hamouriya	2	Syrian Govt.	24,000
	Hazzeh	2	Syrian Govt.	15,000
	Jisreen	2	Syrian Govt.	18,000
	Kafr Batna	2	Syrian Govt.	24,000

	Saqba	2	Syrian Govt.	19,000
	Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
	Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	15,000
	Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	16,500
	Douma	1	Syrian Govt.	140,000
	Hosh al-Dawahirah	2	Syrian Govt.	0
	Al-Rayhan	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Al-Shaifuniya	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Harasta	2	Syrian Govt.	20,000
	Madeira	2	Syrian Govt.	8,000
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	40,000
	Autaya	2	Syrian Govt.	1,000
	Beit Naim	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Nashabiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	3,000
	Al-Salhiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Moadamiyet al-Sham	2	Syrian Govt.	41,000
	Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
	Zabadani	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	200
	Madaya + Baqeen	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	41,000
Deir ez-Zor	Deir ez-Zor	3	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	80,000
Homs	Al-Waer	1	Syrian Govt.	75,000
	Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Govt.	83,000
	Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
	Talbiseh	3	Syrian Govt.	74,000
Idlib	Fuaa	3	Armed groups	} 20,000
	Kafraya	3	Armed groups	
Total				1,326,175

Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA 31 October 2016 report.

**Table of Current Siege Watch
"Watchlist" Locations**

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	?
Rural Damascus	Al-Bilaliyeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Harasta al-Qantara	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Marj al-Sultan	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Nouleh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Bzeina	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Hosh al-Farah	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Hosh Nasri	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Deir Assafir	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Zebdine	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Qudsaya	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	200,000
	Al-Hameh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	35,000
	Wadi Barada	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	50,000
	Khan al-Shieh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	10,000
	Al-Tal	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	850,000
Total				1,145,000



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