

Siege Watch

Sixth Quarterly Report on Besieged
Areas in Syria February-April 2017

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Photo cover: Children prepare to be transferred to Jarablus as part of the al-Waer surrender agreement. 17 April 2017

Photo credit: Lens Young Homs

About PAX

PAX works with committed citizens and partners to protect civilians against acts of war, to end armed violence, and to build just peace. PAX operates independently of political interests.

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About TSI

The Syria Institute (TSI) is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan research organization based in Washington, DC. TSI seeks to address the information and understanding gaps that to hinder effective policymaking and drive public reaction to the ongoing Syria crisis. We do this by producing timely, high quality, accessible, data-driven research, analysis, and policy options that empower decision-makers and advance the public's understanding. To learn more visit www.syriainstitute.org or contact TSI at info@syriainstitute.org.

Siege Watch

Sixth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria
February-April 2017

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	04
Executive Summary	08
1. Introduction	12
General Developments	13
Project Outline	16
Challenges	17
2. Besieged Community Overview	20
Damascus	21
Eastern Ghouta & Damascus	21
Southern Damascus Suburbs	35
Other Rural Damascus (Watchlist)	39
Homs	47
Northern Homs Governorate	48
Al-Waer	51
Deir Ezzor	57
Idlib	59
Aleppo	62
Daraa	63
3. Conclusions and Recommendations	66
Violations of International Law	68
UN Siege Reporting	69
Recommendations	70
Annex – Community Lists & Population Data	74
Index of Maps	
Map 1: Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province	15
Map 2: Besieged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus	21
Map 3: Besieged Communities in Homs	47
Map 4: Besieged Neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor	57
Map 5: Besieged Communities in Idlib	59
Index of Tables	
Table 1: Eastern Ghouta & Damascus Besieged Communities	21
Table 2: Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities	35
Table 3: Homs Governorate Besieged Communities	47
Table 4: Deir Ezzor Besieged Neighborhoods	57
Table 5: Idlib Besieged Communities	59

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Acronyms

AFAD	The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency Turkey
AOG	Armed opposition group
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities
HTF	Humanitarian Task Force
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (second rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
IRGC	Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCHR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SYP	Syrian Pound
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary

This report is the sixth 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 February to April 2017. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground found that:

- ◆ An estimated 879,320 people remain trapped in at least 35 besieged communities across the country and more than 1.3 million additional Syrians live in “Watchlist” areas, under threat of intensified siege and abuse.
- ◆ The Syrian government and its allies remain responsible for the vast majority of all of the sieges in Syria and for the threats to all “Watchlist” communities.
- ◆ Five communities capitulated to forced surrender agreements during the reporting period – three (al-Waer, Madaya and Zabadani) besieged by government forces and two (Fuaa and Kefraya) by opposition forces. All five were subsequently subjected to forced population transfers, uprooting tens of thousands of civilians.
- ◆ Two more “Watchlist” communities in Damascus that were previously covered by local truces – Barzeh and Qaboun – were attacked and brought under intensified siege by pro-government forces. The attacks are precipitating a humanitarian crisis that demands urgent international action.
- ◆ Eastern Ghouta, the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country, is the

most likely target of the Syrian government's next scorched earth campaign. Nearly 420,000 people are at risk.

- ◆ Muhajja in Daraa was added to the "Watchlist" for the first time, indicating an expansion in the government's siege strategy.
- ◆ Humanitarian conditions deteriorated in Deir Ezzor. As a result it has been upgraded to a Tier 2 intensity siege.

During the February – April reporting period, the government grew increasingly emboldened by the success of its "surrender or die" strategy. The increasing pace of forced surrender agreements in besieged and "Watchlist" communities that was noted in prior Siege Watch reports continued apace. Al-Waer, Madaya, and Zabadani all capitulated in the face of increased attacks and threats. Opposition-besieged Fuaa and Kefraya signed similar forced transfer surrender agreements in parallel with Madaya and Zabadani under the "Four Towns" framework. Population transfers of both fighters and civilians commenced in all five areas during the reporting period. As a result of these transfers, Madaya reverted to government control, and Zabadani was completely emptied. *[Note: Al-Waer remained on the besieged list during the reporting period, but was reclassified to the "Watchlist" in late May following the end of the population transfers as the neighborhood reverted to the control of pro-government forces. Fuaa and Kefraya had not yet reverted to opposition control and remained on the besieged list as of time of writing.]*

While many post-surrender communities have seen improvements in civilian welfare, there are also worrying signs that they are vulnerable to fresh human rights abuses by pro-government forces. In all of the besieged and "Watchlist" areas that surrendered to the Syrian government in recent reporting periods, local governance institutions were dismantled, and civilians remaining were afraid to share information for fear of retribution. This silence from post-surrender communities should raise alarm bells for human rights monitors and those concerned with civilian protection in Syria. The limited data obtained by Siege Watch from post-surrender communities indicates they face a range of treatments after pro-government forces reassert control – ranging from an uneasy version of normalcy to prolific and blatant human rights abuses. Humanitarian aid access to many post-surrender communities is still being restricted. Civilians remaining in Wadi Barada appear to be experiencing the worst treatment of any post-surrender community, and displacement out of the area is expected to continue, although the official population transfers have ended.

During the reporting period, the Syrian government attacked Qaboun and Barzeh, two "Watchlist" communities in the eastern part of Damascus city, bringing the neighborhoods under intensified siege. Muhajja, a town in Daraa governorate, was added to the "Watchlist" for the first time. In all of these cases, the government and its allies are actively trying to force surrender agreements on the communities that include population transfers and exclude the issue of detainee releases. In Qaboun and Barzeh, violent attacks intensified as a punishment for rejecting the government's terms. *[Note: In May, opposition fighters in Qaboun (and Tishreen) quietly surrendered and submitted to transfers out of the neighborhoods. A tentative agreement was reached in Barzeh, but stalled after the government refused to release detainees. While there were some population transfers out of Barzeh, the neighbourhood had not yet surrendered to government control as of time of writing. In mid-May, local authorities in Muhajja reached a détente deal with pro-government forces, leading to a partial relaxation of access restrictions. The town did not*

surrender to government control or submit to forced population transfers.]

Also during the reporting period, pro-government forces intensified the siege of Eastern Ghouta by cutting off key smuggling routes and blocking trade at the Wafideen checkpoint, the only official access point for goods. As a result, prices have spiked and humanitarian conditions have declined. There are growing fears that the government is planning a “final assault” on Eastern Ghouta, with the goal of forcing the enclave to surrender and submit to population transfers. With nearly 420,000 people trapped in the enclave, the humanitarian toll of this sort of assault could be tremendous.

Few UN interagency convoys reached besieged areas during the quarter, and life-saving medical supplies continued to be removed from the aid convoys that did succeed. Meanwhile, the lack of medical supplies and equipment has reached a critical point in most besieged communities, and civilians are dying as a result.

As in previous periods, attacks continued to target civilian residential areas, hospitals, schools, and Civil Defense centers. There were also continued reports of the use of banned munitions such as cluster bombs and chemical weapons, as well as incendiary weapons, bunker busters, and more conventional weaponry. Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias play a central role in enforcing the Syrian government’s sieges, and both countries took the lead in forced surrender negotiations.

By the end of April 2017, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimated that a total of 624,500 people were trapped in besieged communities in Syria, compared to nearly 880,000 estimated by Siege Watch. The gap will be even wider once the UN reporting accounts for the completion of the forced transfer agreement in Madaya. Most of the discrepancy between the UN and Siege Watch figures can be accounted for by the besieged communities in northern Homs and the southern Damascus suburbs that Siege Watch counts, but which are still not officially recognized in the UN reporting.

Accurate reporting of the crisis in the besieged areas is an important and necessary step that the UN should take in its approach to besieged areas, but it must also be accompanied by concrete action from the international community to lift the sieges. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the UN Security Council – not the humanitarian agencies – to restore peace and end the atrocities being committed in besieged areas. All signs indicate that the Syrian government – encouraged by the recent success of the “surrender or die” strategy and emboldened by the lack of international response – will continue to intensify and expand its efforts to subdue besieged communities through violence, coercion, and depopulation in the coming months. These violent and forced surrenders create new grievances and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The forced civilian population displacements, along with the other collective punishment tactics of the sieges, constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

NOTE

Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period covered the period of February – April 2017. Since then, there may have been subsequent developments impacting many besieged communities. Please check www.siegewatch.org for the most recent updates. ♦

Key recommendations:

- ♦ The UN Security Council must act on its commitment to enforce Resolution 2139 (2014), which called upon all parties “to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas” and threatened further steps in the case of non-compliance.¹
- ♦ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into communities that have been forced to surrender to the Syrian government to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations.
- ♦ UN OCHA’s Damascus hub should be relieved of any role in the decision-making process on siege designation given the close working relationship that the office must maintain with the Syrian government. Relevant data gathered by the Damascus hub should be sent to be analyzed in a more neutral environment where determinations will be less vulnerable to political pressure.
- ♦ As part of the accountability mechanism established in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248 of 21 December 2016, resources must be allocated to ensure cases are prepared on war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of sieges, such as starvation and forced population transfers.²

¹ UN Security Council, “Resolution 2139 (2014),” S/RES/2139, 22 February 2014, <undocs.org>.

² UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248, “International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011,” A/71/L.48, 21 December 2016.

1. Introduction

This report is the sixth 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 February to April 2017. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that an estimated 879,320 Syrians are still living under siege in 35 communities in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib governorates. Over 1.3 million additional people live in areas on the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” where they face siege-like conditions and are at risk of intensified besieged.

Despite numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access,³ and the creation of the International Syria Support Group’s (ISSG) Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) in February 2016,⁴ the Syrian government – and in a few cases the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and armed opposition groups (AOGs) – continue to besiege communities across Syria. The so-called nationwide “ceasefire” declared by Russia and Turkey in December has existed in name only for most besieged communities. Violence in areas including Waer, Eastern Ghouta, Damascus city, and other parts of Rural Damascus has actually escalated since it was declared.

The Syrian government has been emboldened not only by the military support of its allies, but also by the success of the siege strategy and the complete lack of international response to the

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

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

atrocities committed therein. Accordingly, pro-government forces have expanded their siege tactics to new areas, and this quarter was marked by intensified siege conditions, increased violence, and more forced surrenders resulting in population transfers. When post-surrender communities revert to government control they become difficult to monitor, essentially “going dark” for the project as local reporting contacts are deported, and people who remain are cloaked under a barrier of fear, afraid to speak for fear of retribution by government and militias.

Until the international community takes concrete action to deter or disrupt the sieges, the same patterns of violence, destruction, and forced population transfers will continue to be repeated.

This report focuses primarily on developments from February to April 2017. Additional updates with developments since April 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. All of the reports can be found at: <http://siegewatch.org/reports>.

General Developments

During the February – April 2017 reporting period, the Syrian government and its allies – emboldened by the recent success of its “surrender or die” strategy – continued their systematic campaign to force besieged and “Watchlist” communities to surrender. All of these surrenders have included forced population transfers, in which fighters and civilians are deported to opposition-controlled territory in northern Syria. The transfers occurring after these deals are not considered voluntary evacuations because the populations face no choice but to surrender or die, and displaced civilians have no safeguards for return.

Previously, the government strategy was more akin to “surrender or starve,” with many sieges starting in 2012-2013 and languishing for years. This changed in the summer of 2016 when the besieged city of Darayya in Rural Damascus was the target of a devastating month-long scorched earth campaign by pro-government forces ending in the community’s collapse and the forced transfer of the entire remaining population of the city. Since then, pro-government forces have focused on one or two besieged communities at a time, forcing them to surrender through a combination of intense violence, a crackdown on siege conditions, and coercive “negotiations” often involving threats of annihilation. In this manner the Syrian government and its allies continued systematically conquering besieged and “Watchlist” areas apace during the February – April reporting period.

Al-Waer, Madaya, and Zabadani all capitulated in the face of increased attacks and threats. Opposition-besieged Fuaa and Kefraya signed similar surrender agreements in parallel to Madaya and Zabadani under the “Four Towns” framework. Population transfers of both fighters and civilians commenced in all five areas during the reporting period.

Following the completion of their respective transfers, Madaya reverted to government control, and Zabadani was completely emptied. Madaya joined al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, Wadi Barada, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, Eastern Aleppo, and Moadamiya on the list of post-surrender communities that are being kept on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for continued observation. Zabadani was removed from project monitoring entirely due to its vacancy, joining Darayya, Hosh al-Farah, Hosh Nasri, Zebdine, Deir Assafir, Bzeina, Harasta al-Qantara, Marj al-Sultan, Nouleh, and al-

Bilaliyeh. Population transfers were still ongoing out of al-Waer at the end of the reporting period. Most of the displaced are being sent to increasingly overcrowded and dangerous opposition-controlled areas where humanitarian conditions are poor and the threat of violence is high.

As in past quarters, the post-surrender communities essentially “go dark” for the Siege Watch project, as local reporting contacts are deported and people who remain are cloaked under a barrier of fear, afraid to speak for fear of retribution by government and militias. The limited data obtained by Siege Watch from post-surrender communities indicates they face a range of treatments after pro-government forces reassert control – ranging from an uneasy version of normalcy to prolific and blatant abuses. Based on the information available to Siege Watch, civilians remaining in Wadi Barada appear to be experiencing the worst treatment of any post-surrender community, and displacement out of the area is expected to continue although the official population transfers have ended.

In February, pro-government forces launched a major military assault on Qaboun and Barzeh, breaking multiyear truces and cutting off all access to the area. Additionally, Muhajja, a town in Daraa governorate, was added to the “Watchlist” for the first time. In all of these cases, the government and its allies are actively trying to force surrender agreements on the communities that include population transfers and exclude the issue of detainee releases. These developments all point to the continued expansion of the government’s “surrender or die” campaign. There are also reportedly surrender negotiations ongoing for Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm in the southern Damascus suburbs. Until now these communities have remained resistant to the government terms. *[Note: Since the end of the reporting period Qaboun succumbed to a forced surrender agreement. There were some population transfers out of Barzeh as well, but the neighbourhood had not yet surrendered to government control as of time of writing. Also since the end of the reporting period, Muhajja agreed to a détente with pro-government forces leading to a relaxation of access restrictions. But Muhajja did not fully surrender or accept forced population transfers.]*

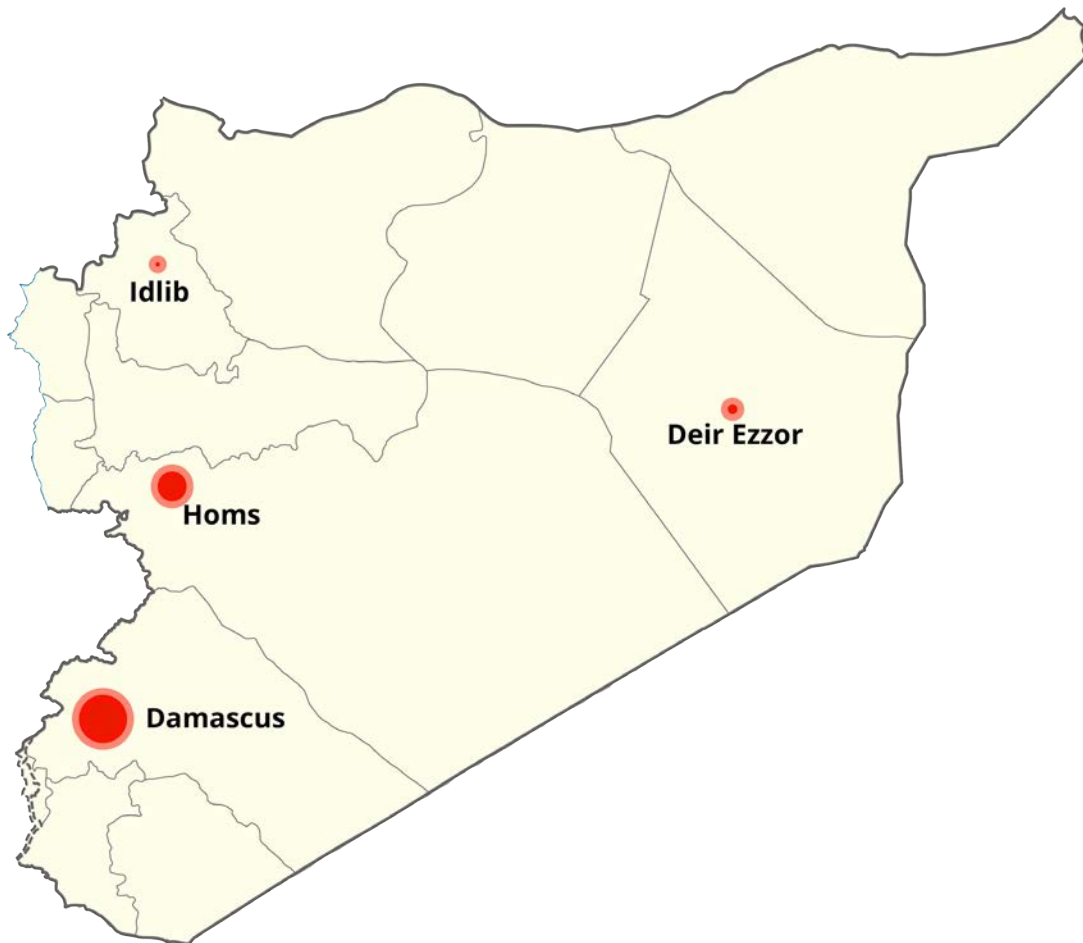
Also during the reporting period, pro-government forces intensified the siege of Eastern Ghouta by cutting off key smuggling routes and blocking trade at the Wafideen checkpoint. As a result, prices have spiked and humanitarian conditions have declined. There are growing fears that the government is planning a “final assault” on Eastern Ghouta. Unless action is taken to end this “surrender or die” campaign, approximately 420,000 people are at risk.

For the majority of communities remaining under siege, humanitarian conditions deteriorated even further over the reporting period as a result of increased violence and decreased humanitarian access. A few UN interagency convoys reached besieged areas during the quarter, and life-saving medical supplies continued to be removed from the aid convoys that did succeed. Meanwhile, the lack of medical supplies and equipment has reached a critical point in most besieged communities, and civilians are dying as a result.

Currently, all indications suggest that the trends will continue in the coming period, and the nearly 880,000 people still trapped in besieged areas will be faced with the choice to either surrender to abusive forced surrender terms and partial population transfers, or resist and face complete destruction and depopulation. The forced surrender agreements being imposed on besieged and embattled areas will continue to create new grievances and exacerbate civilian suffering.

Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province



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 the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) in its March 2015 ‘Slow Death’ report.⁶ All three tiers meet the UN OCHA criteria for besieged. 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.
- ◆ 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.

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, <www.sams-usa.net>.

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 but civilian populations remain in place.

Siege Watch also maintains a list of depopulated communities, which were removed from project monitoring efforts after their entire population fled or was forcibly transferred out.

Communities that come under a new 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 that have capitulated to government surrender terms to end 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. For more details on the data collection process, please see the first quarterly Siege Watch report from February 2016.

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.⁷

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, in addition to 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 people deported from “reconciled” communities have included local council members and activists who maintain contact with the outside world. Siege Watch contacts were forcibly transferred from several communities during the reporting period, making it challenging to monitor post surrender developments.

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 people deported from surrendering communities have included local council members and activists who maintain contact with the outside world.

⁷ 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.

Siege Watch contacts were forcibly transferred 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 limited movement and 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.

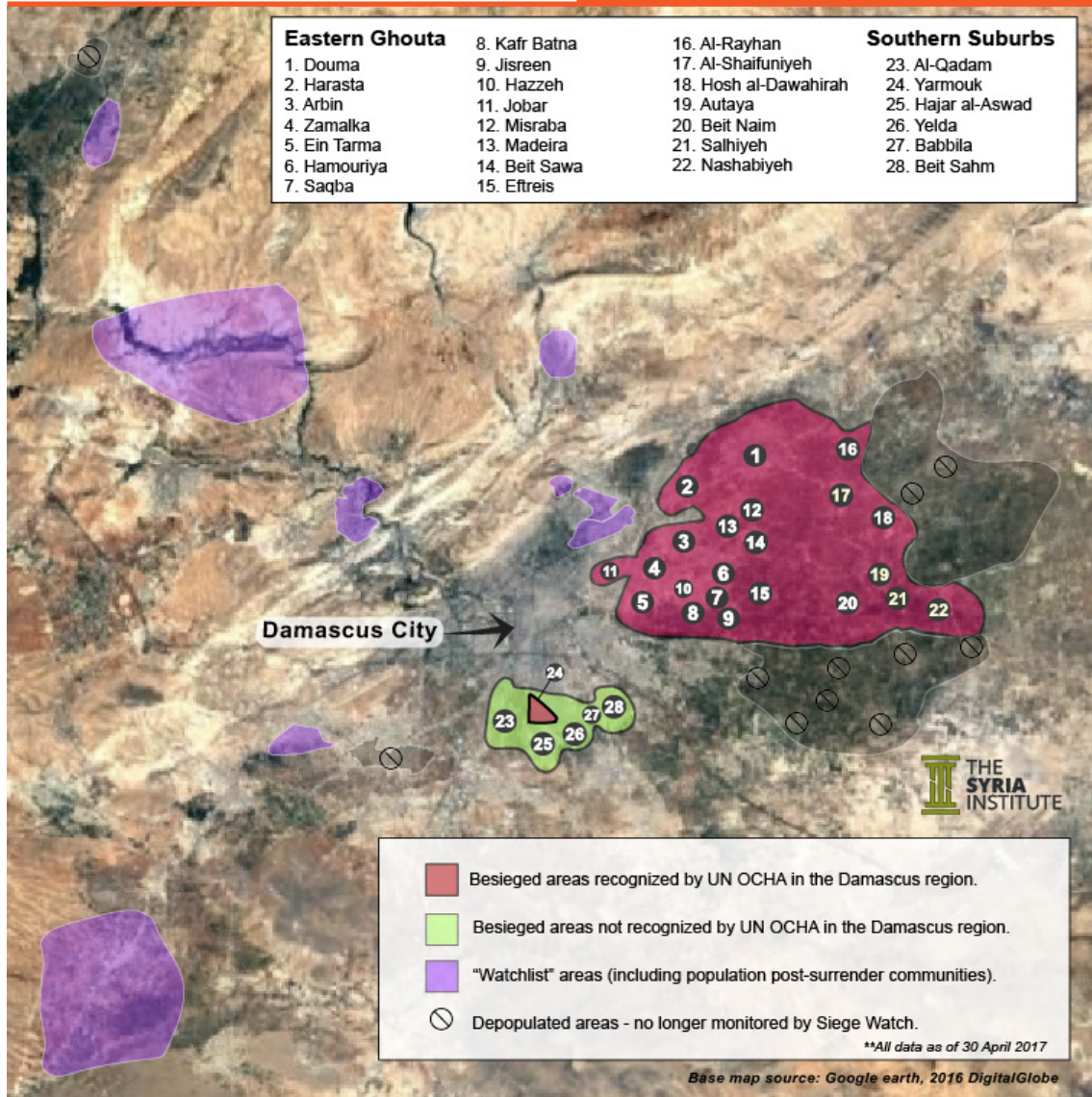
Rapid developments in some areas at times outpaced data collection efforts. Where updated information is unavailable, it is noted in the report. ♦

2. Besieged Community Overview

Damascus

Map 2:

Besieged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus



EASTERN GHOUTA & DAMASCUS

Table 1:

Eastern Ghouta & Damascus Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Eastern Ghouta (22 communities)	Mainly 2	Syrian Govt.	419,620

*Note: See Annex I for a complete list.

Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta worsened significantly during the reporting period, and a new government military offensive ended the multi-year truces in the Damascus neighborhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun. Qaboun was added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” which Barzeh was already on. Population estimate adjustments were made to several besieged communities as a result of significant internal displacement.

Details:

The Eastern Ghouta area of Rural Damascus governorate remained besieged by government forces and pro-government militias during the February – April reporting period. There are at least 22 communities within this besieged area.⁸

Early in the reporting period, the government broke long-standing truces with the Damascus neighborhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun (note: Tishreen is considered a part of the Qaboun neighborhood), bringing them under complete siege and launching intense military attacks aimed at forcing them to surrender. As in other similar cases, the military campaign was accompanied by coercive threats and surrender deadlines by government negotiators, with attacks escalating when deadlines passed without a resolution.⁹ This offensive had a significant impact on besieged Eastern Ghouta, which was connected to Barzeh and Qaboun via smuggling tunnels that provided a valuable coping mechanism for the population. In addition to the new campaign against eastern Damascus neighborhoods, other major developments during the reporting period include the intensification of the siege, new waves of internal displacement, increased violence, and rebel infighting at the end of April.

Military

The February – April reporting period was a violent one for both the besieged eastern suburbs of Damascus and the Eastern Ghouta enclave. Assad Coalition attacks were particularly intense in the eastern city neighborhoods of Qaboun (including Tishreen), Barzeh, and Jobar, in addition to the northwestern communities of Eastern Ghouta closest to these Damascus city neighborhoods. Suspected chlorine chemical attacks against opposition forces were reported throughout the February – April reporting period, as were attacks with cluster munitions, incendiary munitions, and other types of weaponry. In Qaboun and Barzeh there were repeated reports of the use of “hose bombs,” an improved explosive device similar to barrel bombs, but where explosives are packed into hoses instead of solid containers. As in past quarters, Russian and Syrian airstrikes continued to target civilian infrastructure including markets, schools, and hospitals.

Fighting continued along the southern al-Marj front and the eastern al-Hosh fronts of Eastern Ghouta over the February – April period, although no notable government gains were made. Instead, pro-government forces focused primarily on pushing the eastern Damascus neighborhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun to surrender after ending multi-year truces with the neighborhoods.

⁸ 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.

⁹ All4Syria, “بعد انتهاء المهلة... قوات النظام تحاول اقتحام حي القابون الدمشقي,” 27 February 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.

Significant attacks and military developments:

- ◆ 2 February – The Syrian government bombed the Damascus city neighborhood of Qaboun with five airstrikes. This was the first time the government had attacked Qaboun in three years, ending a multiyear truce agreement.
- ◆ 7-8 February – A wave of pro-government attacks targeted several besieged communities in Damascus and Eastern Ghouta including Jobar, Harasta, Arbin, Douma, Ain Tarma, and Zamalka. Approximately 16 airstrikes hit Arbin, killing two people including an infant named Osama Safsaf. One of the Arbin attacks disbursed a toxic gas believed to be chlorine.
- ◆ 9 February – Pro-government forces targeted opposition fighters on the outskirts of Arbin using shells that dispersed a toxic substance believed to be chlorine. At 7:30am the Arbin Surgical Hospital received four patients suffering from severe exposure to the substance.¹⁰ One of the patients died due to burns received after falling onto a stove when he lost consciousness after the gas attack. The symptoms of the other patients included lapsing consciousness, labored breathing, foaming mouths, and glassy eyes.
- ◆ 10 February – The Arbin Surgical Hospital received three patients who lost consciousness after reportedly inhaling a toxic gas released during a government attack. The doctor confirmed a chlorine-like smell on the clothing of the victims, all of whom survived. This was the third suspected chlorine attack on the outskirts of Arbin in four days.
- ◆ 19 February – Douma was hit with six airstrikes in addition to heavy artillery fire. Three of the airstrikes targeted civilian markets. One young girl was killed in the attacks.
- ◆ 20 February – Syrian government airstrikes hit the Damascus city neighborhood of Barzeh for the first time in three years, ending a multiyear truce agreement. An estimated seven civilians were killed and dozens were injured.
- ◆ 21 February – Pro-government forces targeted opposition fighters in the rural area near Hosh al-Dawahira and Hosh Nasri with rockets containing a toxic substance believed to be chlorine.¹¹ Minor injuries were reported.
- ◆ 23 February – Harasta was hit with at least six air raids using incendiary munitions containing a napalm-like substance.
- ◆ 25-26 February – Pro-government forces significantly escalated attacks against Qaboun and Barzeh, in addition to intense bombardment against nearby communities in Eastern Ghouta. Harasta was targeted with a toxic substance

¹⁰ Arbin Surgical Hospital, "مشفى عرين الجراحي استهداف اطراف المدينة بغاز الكلور," YouTube video, 9 February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ArbinHospital>>.

¹¹ All4Syria, "قصفُ بالغازات السامة على غوطة دمشق الشرقية," 21 February 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.



Aftermath of Douma airstrikes. 19 February 2017



Doctors treat a victim of a suspected chlorine chemical attack near Arbin. 19 February 2017



First responders pull the body of the infant Osama Safsaf from the rubble of an airstrike in Arbin. 7 February 2017



Locals struggle to put out flames after incendiary attack targeting Douma Local Council office. 26 February 2017



Aftermath of incendiary attack outside of Douma Local Council. 26 February 2017

believed to be chlorine. Additionally, incendiary munitions containing a napalm-like substance targeted the Local Council office in Douma.¹²

- ◆ 6-8 March – Pro-government forces including Russian aircraft launched a major wave of attacks on Eastern Ghouta, with an estimated 60-80 airstrikes recorded on 6 March alone. On 7 March, airstrikes hit a school in Autaya during the school day. Despite efforts to take cover, several people – including children – were injured. The school was destroyed. Notably, this escalation coincided with a so-called “regime of silence,” unilaterally declared by Russia in Eastern Ghouta.¹³
- ◆ 19-21 March – Opposition forces in the Jobar area launched an offensive aimed at recapturing lost ground connecting the neighborhood to Qaboun. Pro-government forces, including Russia, responded with heavy counterattacks. It is estimated that pro-government forces launched more than 200 airstrikes in just two days. These strikes targeted not only the area of the opposition offensive in Jobar and Arbin, but also the communities of Douma, Hamouriya, Zamalka, Ein Tarma, Hazzeh, and Harasta.
- ◆ 27 March – Airstrikes targeted a civilian residential area of Hamouriyeh, killing at least 15 people and injuring more than 100.
- ◆ 29 March – At around 6:00am in the morning, government aircraft targeted Qaboun with a missile that released toxic gas suspected to be chlorine. Approximately 35 people experienced difficulty breathing, with cases all in the mild-moderate range. One of the Syrian Civil Defense first responders also suffered symptoms of exposure. All victims were treated and released.¹⁴
- ◆ 3-4 April – Dozens of people were killed in another intense wave of pro-government attacks targeting most besieged communities across Damascus and Eastern Ghouta. On 3 April, Russian and Syrian warplanes launched more than 95 airstrikes, followed by more than 60 the next day, along with hundreds of mortar shells and small arms attacks. More than 60 people in Eastern Ghouta – including women and children – were killed over the course of two days, and hundreds were injured. Among the attacks, an airstrike targeted Jisreen’s only remaining medical center, taking it out of service. Double tap airstrikes intentionally targeted Syrian Civil Defense rescue workers in both Saqba and Kafr Batna. Jobar was reportedly hit with more than 40 airstrikes and more than 50 shells on 4 April alone, and in Barzeh there was intense shelling as pro-government ground forces tried to advance. The deadliest single attack during this time occurred in Douma, where an airstrike targeted a civilian market, killing approximately 21 people. The Douma Local Council released a statement detailing the attack and was itself bombed an hour later.

12 Al Jazeera, “النظام يهاجم الغوطة بالكلور وروسيا تقتصف بالنابالم,” 26 February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2qcm8bz>>; Jobar News, “استخدام الغاز الكلور في حرسنا من قبل قوات الأسد , مما أدى للعديد من”, 26 February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2qOENMn>>.

13 AFP, “Ceasefire announced in Syria’s Eastern Ghouta: Russia,” Al-Monitor, 7 March 2017, <www.al-monitor.com>.

14 All4Syria, “رداً على خسائرنا... قوات النظام تستهدف أحياء دمشق الشرقية بالغازات السامة”, 30 March 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.



Remains of school in Autaya after airstrikes. 7 March 2017



Remains of school in Autaya after airstrikes. 7 March 2017



Children treated for injuries from suspected Russian airstrikes in Arbin. 7 April 2017

- ◆ 7 April – Three children were killed and more than 50 people injured in what were believed to be Russian airstrikes against Douma and Arbin. Additionally, a suspected chlorine chemical attack targeted opposition fighters on the frontline in Qaboun.¹⁵
- ◆ 16-17 April – Pro-government forces launched another intensive wave of attacks against besieged Eastern Ghouta and Damascus communities. In Arbin, mortar fire targeted an ambulance that was transporting the wounded, killing the paramedic who was driving the vehicle.¹⁶ The wave of attacks came at the height of widespread fears that Eastern Ghouta would be targeted by a major sarin attack.
- ◆ 22 April – Seven opposition fighters in the Arbin/Zamalka area were injured in a suspected chlorine chemical attack. The toxic substance was reportedly deployed by pro-government forces in hand grenades.¹⁷

15 All4Syria, "قوات النظام تستهدف حي القابون المشقي بغاز الكلور بعد فشلها في اقتحامه," 7 April 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.

16 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook Post, 17 April 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMC1704>>.

17 All4Syria, "النظام يستهدف (عربيين) بغاز الكلور للمرة الرابعة خلال شهرين," 23 April 2017, <www.all4syria.info>; Ghouta Media Center, Facebook Post, 22 April 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2qbJOxA>>.

- ◆ 28 April – Infighting erupted among armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta, as Jaysh al-Islam launched a campaign to destroy Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

For residents of Eastern Ghouta, the 4 April 2017 chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib, recalled traumatic memories of the 21 August 2013 sarin attack where nearly 1,500 people in Eastern Ghouta and other Damascus suburbs were killed. In the weeks that followed the Khan Sheikhoun attack, residents of Eastern Ghouta became increasingly afraid that they would be hit with a new major government chemical attack. Swirling speculations reached a panicked pitch by 15 April, egged on by rumors about detailed attack plans spread on pro-government social media pages, major security clampdowns in the government-controlled areas of the capital, and reports issued by the Russian and Syrian governments warning of looming chemical attacks by opposition forces – which were seen as an attempt to frame opposition fighters in advance.¹⁸ Local media outlets in opposition areas were circulating informational material on what to do in case of a chemical attack.¹⁹ The opposition's Health Directorate of Damascus and Rural Damascus felt it necessary to issue a letter to the UN Secretary-General to deny government claims that they were using the Douma Hospital to manufacture chemical weapons for a pending attack.²⁰

¹⁸ Bashar Ja'afari, "Identical letters dated 19 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council," S/2017/341, <undocs.org>.

¹⁹ Qaboun Media Office, Facebook Post, 15 April 2017, <<http://bit.ly/QabounCO>>.

²⁰ Ghouta Media Center, Facebook Post, 26 April 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMC0426>>.



Smoke fills the air during attacks on Douma. 3 April 2017



Victims of a deadly market airstrike in Douma. 3 April 2017



First responders race towards the blast during a double tap strike on Kafr Batna. 3 April 2017



Men search the rubble of a building destroyed in Saqba airstrikes. 4 April 2017

“Do you know anything about **real horror**? Where **you cannot sleep** for fear of inhaling the **poisonous gases** previously fired by Bashar al-Assad on us... Today, when **the warning** arrived, **the memory brought me back** to those painful days.”

Siege Watch contact in E. Ghouta. 11 April 2017

The new government military campaign against Qaboun and Barzeh became incredibly intense during the reporting period. In Qaboun in particular, the offensive seemed to employ scorched earth tactics aimed at destroying the neighborhood. *[Note: In May, opposition fighters in Qaboun (and Tishreen) quietly surrendered and submitted to transfers out of the neighborhoods, which appeared to be reverting to government control. For Barzeh a tentative agreement was reached but stalled after the government refused to release detainees. Negotiations are ongoing.]*

At the end of April, opposition infighting erupted as Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) launched an offensive that they claim was aimed at destroying Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – a group dominated by former members of the al-Qaeda affiliated group, Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS is the second rebranding effort by al-Nusra and is generally considered to still be al-Qaeda affiliated. The armed opposition group al-Rahman Corps was also caught up in the fighting despite JAI claims that it was only targeting HTS. The infighting spurred a barrage of statements and accusations by armed groups across the country, and prompted large protests demanding an end to the fighting. Dozens of fighters and a number of civilians were killed in the clashes, which effectively shut down much of civilian life in heavily impacted neighborhoods including Hazzeh, Kafr Batna, and Arbin. The infighting, and the protests against them, continued into May. *[Note: On 5 May*

2017, JAI announced an end to the operation against HTS, although there were intermittent flare-ups later in the month. Siege Watch contacts reported that JAI had been successful in routing HTS from many areas and significantly weakening the power of the organization in Eastern Ghouta. JAI also reportedly turned control of some of the captured communities over to al-Rahman Corps following the end of its operation, as a peace offering.]

Humanitarian & Social

The siege of Eastern Ghouta intensified significantly during the reporting period. With the campaign against Qaboun and Barzeh neighborhoods in February, the checkpoints between these areas and government-controlled neighborhoods were sealed off, preventing the flow of goods. As a result, the supplies flowing from Qaboun and Barzeh through smuggling tunnels into Eastern Ghouta began to dry up and ultimately ceased. This was followed by a decrease in al-Manfoush's trade at the Wafideen checkpoint later in the month. Al-Manfoush had long been the only government-approved trader selling commercial supplies into Eastern Ghouta via the Wafideen checkpoint. Although the prices were highly inflated, a sort of predatory tactic against the besieged area, these supplies also constituted a key coping mechanism for the besieged population.

With the curtailed trade occurring almost concurrently with the closure of smuggling tunnels, all Eastern Ghouta contacts reported a significant increase in prices of all commodities starting in early March. Many goods such as fruit and eggs became largely unavailable. Over the past year, pro-government forces captured the "breadbasket" of Eastern Ghouta in the southern al-Marj area. The remaining arable land in Eastern Ghouta is not sufficient to produce enough food for the entire population, particularly with the lack of access to automated farming techniques and poor irrigation.

The February – April reporting period saw greater than average internal civilian displacement within Eastern Ghouta and the besieged Damascus neighborhoods as a result of the escalated violence. While some communities reported receiving IDPs from the northeastern rural communities near al-Rayhan and Hosh al-Dawahira, the majority of the internal displacement this quarter came as a result of people fleeing the fighting in the Damascus neighborhoods of Qaboun and Barzeh. When attacks on Qaboun began, thousands fled into Barzeh and to surrounding besieged communities through the smuggling tunnels. Thousands in Barzeh similarly fled into Eastern Ghouta to escape the fighting. Although Siege Watch could not independently arrive at revised population estimates, UN OCHA in March estimated that around 17,000 people from Qaboun and Barzeh had fled into Eastern Ghouta since the attacks began in February, and another 10,000 fled northwards to al-Tal.²¹ By mid-March, the pro-government forces had succeeded in sealing off all potential routes, preventing further displacement out of Barzeh and Qaboun.²² Humanitarian conditions for the more than 40,000 people estimated to be trapped inside worsened, with many civilians spending days in basements serving as bomb shelters while supplies dwindled. *[Note: Since the end of the reporting period Qaboun succumbed to a forced surrender agreement. There were some population transfers out of Barzeh as well, but the neighbourhood had not yet surrendered to government control as of time of writing.]*

²¹ UN OCHA, "OCHA Flash Update Syria Crisis – Eastern Ghouta No. 1 | 26 – March – 2017 [EN/AR]," <reliefweb.int>.

²² Alaa Nassar, Ruwaida Jamal, Jessica Page, "'They're not letting us leave': Residents in east Damascus suburbs trapped as government renews military offensive," Syria Direct, 13 March 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

In mid-February, the Douma dialysis clinic – the last in Eastern Ghouta – put out an emergency call for international assistance, as it had insufficient supplies and equipment to treat its patients.²³ The last time it had received any supplies was October 2016. The clinic had approximately 31 acute kidney failure patients at that time, but around 120 others whose cases were not considered severe enough for treatment given the limited supplies. Between 20 February and 2 March, three patients at the center died due to the lack of necessary treatments.²⁴ Finally on 9 March 2017, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) delivered a small shipment of dialysis supplies provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) to the clinic. According to the medical staff, the 250 treatments would be sufficient for less than a month.

There remains a critical demand for medical supplies throughout Eastern Ghouta, particularly child vaccines and treatment for chronic conditions. As conditions deteriorated throughout the reporting period there were increased reports of disease outbreaks such as measles and hepatitis, along with rising reports of malnutrition.

Beyond the small dialysis supply delivery to Douma in February, not a single community in Eastern Ghouta was reached with UN international humanitarian assistance during the reporting period, nor were the newly besieged neighborhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun in Damascus.

On 8 March, an armed mob raided a building that housed the offices of a number of non-governmental civil society organizations after a local court affiliated with the armed group Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) ordered all of the civil society organizations in the building to close their offices. The move reportedly came in response to an article published by one of the organizations – the Rising for Freedom Magazine – deemed blasphemous by the court, and appears to have sparked genuine anger among some in the conservative Douma area, causing protests outside of the magazine's office.²⁵

In addition to Rising for Freedom, the order also suspended operations for the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria, the Hurras Network for children, the Local Development and Small Projects Organization, The Day After, the Local Coordination Committees, and the Syrian Nonviolence Movement. The closure of the offices of these unrelated organizations suggests that the move was part of a campaign by JAI to clamp down on independent civil society voices in the area.²⁶ The move sparked condemnation from a wide range of Syrian civil society organizations, and four days later the local court issued a decision allowing most of the NGOs to reopen.

There are also reports that Jaysh al-Islam now holds a majority of the seats on the 25-person Douma Local Council, as a result of an ongoing campaign to unseat independent members who do not answer to the group.

23 Douma Medical Office, "بدء نفاذ المواد اللازمة لجلسات التحال الدموي," 10 February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaDialysisAppeal>>.

24 Douma Medical Office, "وفاة مريض قصور كلوي بسبب تأخر دخول المواد," 21 February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaDialysis1>>; Douma Medical Office, "الوفية الثانية من مرضى القصور," 28 February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaDialysis2>>; Douma Medical Office, "الوفية الثالثة من مرضى القصور الكلوي بسبب تأخر دخول المواد," 2 March 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaDialysis3>>.

25 Rising for Freedom, "مظاهرة في دوما احتجاجاً على مجلة طلعتنا العالوية," 8 March 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2q6EMm5>>; Violations Documentation Center in Syria, "Attack on the Offices of the Civil Society Organizations in Damascus, Ghouta," 8 March 2017, <vdc-sy.net>.

26 Paul McLoughlin, "Ghouta's Guardians: Syrian children's charity closes after intimidation campaign," The New Arab, 9 March 2017, <www.alaraby.co.uk/english>.

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.	20,000
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:			65,000

Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 30 April 2017.

Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions in Yarmouk deteriorated as a result of increased violence. Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm experienced political turmoil as a result of government efforts to force a surrender agreement on the enclave. International humanitarian aid reached several of the southern suburbs for the first time in over a year. No changes were made to Tier levels, small adjustments made to population estimates.

Details:

The southern suburbs enclave of Rural Damascus remained surrounded by Syrian military forces and sectarian pro-government militias during the February – April reporting period. The besieged neighborhoods are still controlled by a patchwork of armed groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the former al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (now rebranded as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham – HTS), and various armed opposition groups. Four of the six besieged communities – Yelda, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and al-Qadam – all have had truces with the government in place since 2014, but conditions have not completely normalized.

Damascus' southern suburbs continue to enjoy some entry of basic commercial goods through government-controlled checkpoints into al-Qadam on the west, and the Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm enclave on the east. The amount and type of supplies that enter this way are limited, and incur a tariff that inflates prices by at least 20 percent. Some medical supplies, particularly those needed for surgical interventions, are still highly restricted. The besieged southern suburbs area does not have access to running water and has inconsistent access to electricity.

While populations in the southern suburbs have fluctuated in recent months, new population estimates for the communities were not available.

Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad – Conditions for civilians in Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk continued to be worse than in other neighborhoods, as they are primarily under the control of ISIS and HTS and experience greater violence and additional access restrictions. Some of the goods that enter the other southern suburbs through government-controlled checkpoints are filtered into Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk, but the flow is intermittent and can be unpredictable as the armed group checkpoints are frequently closed due to security developments, and the border area between ISIS and other armed group control is subject to sniping and sudden clashes.

Control of the Yarmouk camp is divided, with HTS controlling a northwestern section, pro-government Palestinian militias controlling small northeastern portions of the neighborhood, with ISIS controlling the rest. Yarmouk camp experienced violent clashes throughout the reporting period involving ISIS, HTS, and to a lesser extent, pro-government Palestinian militias. Violence between ISIS and HTS escalated at the end of April as ISIS attempted to take control of HTS-controlled areas to pre-empt the possible handover of these areas to government forces during the next stage of the “Four Towns” agreement.²⁷

Humanitarian conditions in Yarmouk remained grim, with shortages of bread,²⁸ water, and other necessities reported throughout the February – April reporting period. The only remaining medical center in Yarmouk lacks supplies, and at least one newborn reportedly died during the reporting period due to the lack of access to medical care.²⁹ Residents trapped in the HTS area appear to be in the greatest need, as ISIS has further restricted the movement of supplies into this zone.

Civilians in all parts of Yarmouk are vulnerable to looting, evictions, unpredictable barrier closures, and other forms of harassment by armed groups.³⁰ Those in the ISIS-controlled parts of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad are subjected to brutal abuses under ISIS’s harsh governance, including death by stoning and child recruitment.

On 23 April, the SARC reached the HTS-controlled portion of Yarmouk with a small aid shipment including 300 food parcels and 300 hygiene kits.³¹ Though small, this aid delivery was notable in that it was the first time that Yarmouk was directly accessed by any aid in over a year. The delivery was allowed entrance in the context of the “Four Towns” agreement. Though the agreement primarily addresses the situation in Madaya, Zabadani, Fuaa, and Kefraya, there have been efforts to fold in surrender deals for other areas under its framework. In this context, several injured HTS fighters in Yarmouk were evacuated in return for the evacuation of several injured pro-government fighters from Fuaa and Kefraya, Idlib. The negotiations were done directly with HTS without the input of local civilian actors.

Hajar al-Aswad has still never been directly reached with UN humanitarian assistance. UN OCHA

27 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, “Humanitarian Situation Takes Turn for Worse in Yarmouk following Deadly Clashes between ISIS, Fatah AlSham,” 28 April 2017, <actionpal.org/en>.

28 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, “Two Palestinian Refugee Die in Syria, one of them due to Al-Tal Siege in Damascus Suburb,” 19 May 2017, <actionpal.org.uk/en>.

29 Palestinian Refugees Portal, “الحصار يتسبب بوفاة طفل في مخيم اليرموك فور ولادته,” 20 March 2017, <refugeesps.net>.

30 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, “Stranded Civilians in Yarmouk Camp Grappling With Crackdowns by ISIS, Warring Actors in Syria,” 7 April 2017, <actionpal.org.uk/en>.

31 Syrian Arab Red Crescent, “Humanitarian Relief Aid Reached Al-Yarmouk Camp,” 25 April 2017, <sarc.sy>.



Large crowd in Beit Sahm protests against forced displacement deal. 13 April 2017

briefly recognized the siege of Hajar al-Aswad for the first time on 1 November 2016, before reversing its decision on 26 January 2017. Hajar al-Aswad has been besieged since 2013 and faces similar conditions to the adjacent Yarmouk neighborhood: civilians in both neighborhoods live under a double siege, suffering both from the lack of services and supplies as well as the tyranny of ISIS rule. UN OCHA's decisions to designate and then un-designate Hajar al-Aswad do not correlate with any discernable developments on the ground.

Yelda, Babbila and Beit Sahm – On 8 April 2017, a UN/SARC interagency aid convoy reached Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm (YBB) for the first time in nearly a year. The shipment contained food, WASH, and health supplies, although the amount was insufficient for the entire population.³² According to the UN, 5,800 medical treatments were removed from the delivery.³³

Local residents, under the impression that the convoy was allowed entrance by government forces as part of the efforts to include YBB in the “Four Towns” agreement, called for a strike and thousands came out to protest against the deal. The demonstrators rejected forced displacement, the “Four Towns” agreement, and foreign interference, indicating that the efforts to tie YBB to the agreement had failed. The “Four Towns” agreement negotiators Iran and Qatar worked directly with armed groups such as HTS, cutting out local civilian actors in the process. The protestors stressed

³² Local Council of Beit Sahm, Facebook Post, 8 April 2017, <<http://bit.ly/LoCaBS>>.

³³ UN Security Council, S/2017/445, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016),” 23 May 2017, <www.un.org>.



Protestors in Babila write slogans in Russian and on WFP aid boxes. 12 April 2017

that any negotiations must be conducted by a local political-military negotiating committee, and photos of the protests showed WFP humanitarian aid boxes with the words “Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahn” written in front of the phrase “not intended for sale.” Despite the protests and the failure to include YBB in the “Four Towns” agreement, there are reportedly several parallel lines of negotiations continuing behind the scenes involving various sets of actors.

While humanitarian conditions in the southern suburbs remain better than in some other besieged areas, they are still poor. A third party reporting source stated that four children in the YBB area died in March due to their inability to access sufficient medical care.³⁴ Medical supplies are still highly restricted at the checkpoints allowing limited movement into the area.

Al-Qadam was reportedly not included in the negotiations to bring YBB under the “Four Towns” agreement, and there were no notable developments reported during the February – April period.

34 Palestinian Refugees Portal, “حواجز النظام تتسبب في وفاة “أربعة” أطفال في جنوب دمشق”, 17 March 2017, <refugeesps.net>.

OTHER RURAL DAMASCUS (WATCHLIST)

Snapshot:

Conditions in Madaya and Zabadani reached new lows during the reporting period, leading both communities to surrender under a “Four Towns” agreement framework in late March. Following the implementation of the agreement, Madaya was reclassified as “Watchlist” and Zabadani was depopulated and therefore removed from project monitoring entirely. Al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, Wadi Barada, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, and Moadamiya all remain on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” after surrendering to the government in prior reporting periods.

Details:

Madaya and Zabadani – Conditions in Madaya and Zabadani were critical at the start of the reporting period due to the sustained deprivation of food, water, and fuel, a lack of access to medical care, and constant sniping and attacks from surrounding forces which included Hezbollah, Iraqi militiamen, and Syrian government forces.

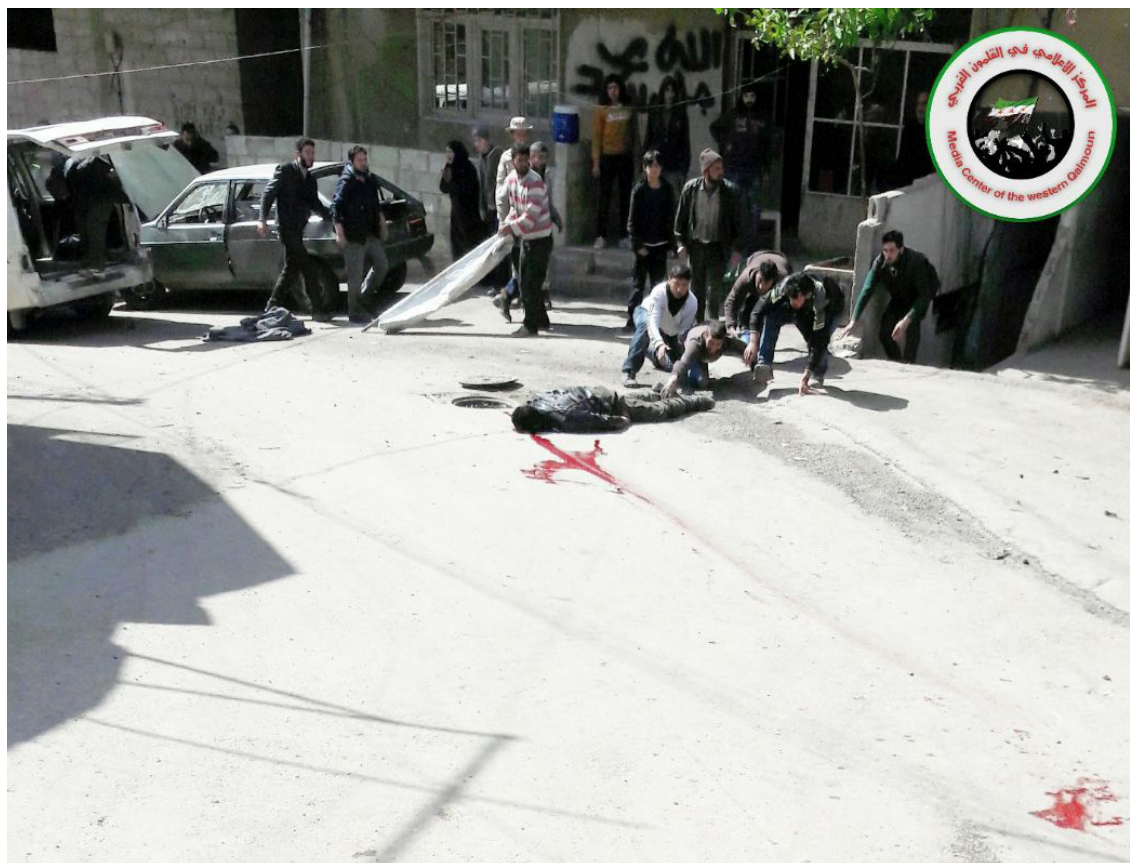
On 6 February, Ali Ghasn, Madaya resident experiencing kidney failure, died. The clinic had run out of dialysis supplies and there were only painkillers available to treat his kidney failure. Following another disturbing trend from the prior quarter: on 15 February, a woman named Sana Awad died along with her newborn from complications of childbirth due to the lack of available medical treatment.



Ali Ghasn shortly before his death due to kidney failure in Madaya

Sniping and shelling was reported on a daily basis in Madaya, with frequent reports of civilians being killed and injured. Hezbollah snipers at several checkpoints overlooking the city appeared to be literally targeting anything that moved, evidenced by the frequent reports of children being injured and even killed in sniper attacks. The nearly complete lack of medical supplies and staff in Madaya exacerbated the damage of these attacks.

On 14 March, the towns were reached with an interagency UN/ICRC shipment of humanitarian aid containing food and medical supplies in return for a similar shipment reaching the government-



Rescuers struggle to pull a sniper victim out of the line of fire in Madaya. 19 March 2017

controlled besieged areas of Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib. The trucks intended for Madaya were delayed until 15 March at a Hezbollah checkpoint. According to the UN, pro-government forces removed 16,143 medical treatments from the aid trucks destined for Madaya, and 3,218 from the trucks destined for Zabadani.³⁵ Several medical emergency cases were reportedly evacuated with the convoy, including three suffering from sniper wounds and one woman with cancer.

The day after the delivery, Hezbollah sniper fire aimed at the warehouse prevented distribution of the aid and killed and injured several people. Among those was a 15-year old boy who was shot in the face by a sniper. Although he survived for a day after his injury, he was not granted medical evacuation and later died. When the supplies were unpacked, local officials noted that the cans of tuna named on the supply list were missing, depriving civilians of desperately needed protein. The heavier than normal sniping and bombardment continued in the weeks following the aid convoy.

On 28 March, reports arose that an agreement had been reached to bring a new ceasefire to Madaya, Zabadani, Fuaa, and Kefraya. The new “Four Towns” deal was reportedly brokered by Iran and Qatar and negotiated directly with HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, without the input of civil society. As a result, Siege Watch contacts in the besieged communities could not provide

³⁵ UN Security Council, S/2017/339, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016),” 19 April 2017, <www.un.org>.

clear details of the terms of the complex, multi-stage deal. According to various media reports, the multi-step agreement would result in the deportation of all of the remaining population of Fuaa, Kefraya, and Zabadani (where only fighters remained), and around half of the population of Madaya, in addition to the release of a number of government detainees.³⁶ The agreement backers apparently attempted to tie other areas such as the southern suburbs of Damascus into the same deal, but met with limited success.

In mid-April, the first stage of the agreement took place after nearly two weeks of delays reportedly caused by the logistical challenges of moving so many people. On 14 April, an estimated 3,150 people were transported primarily out of Madaya, 400 of whom were fighters and the remainder civilians. The deportees were transported to the Ramouseh bus depot on the outskirts of Aleppo city, which was being used as a holding area so that they could be transferred to opposition-controlled areas of Idlib concurrently with around 5,000 deportees from Fuaa and Kefraya, who were taken to a different holding area in Aleppo. During the holding period, a suicide bombing targeted the Fuaa and Kefraya deportees in the Rashideen area, killing more than 100 people. As a result, the transfer of the Madaya deportees to Idlib was delayed for over 15 hours. The displaced residents were left without provisions and increasingly feared that they would be subjected to revenge attacks while they were held in the depot, prompting some to issue distress calls to international organizations. Ultimately the convoy was allowed to proceed to Idlib.

On 19 April, there was a smaller second transfer consisting primarily of the remaining fighters from Zabadani, which reached Idlib on 21 April. Following this transfer, Zabadani reverted completely to pro-government forces and was entirely emptied of its original population and all opposition fighters. Accordingly, it has been removed from Siege Watch project monitoring efforts.

As in other areas, local Siege Watch contacts were deported from Madaya during the forced population transfers and the area essentially “went dark,” with subsequent developments becoming difficult to monitor. According to third-party reports and follow-up conversations with displaced Siege Watch contacts with relatives still inside Madaya, living conditions have greatly improved for those remaining, but have not yet normalized. Following the population transfers there was widespread looting by pro-government forces.³⁷ Civilians remaining behind in Madaya are afraid to discuss conditions in the area under the re-established government rule.

The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities like Madaya on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

36 Ahlam Salamat, “إخلاء تام للفوعة وكفريا... قاتد,” All4Syria, 28 March 2017 <<http://bit.ly/2rDPDFe>>; “هنة جديدة في ريفي إلب ودمشق تتضمن إخلاء عدة مناطق من سكانها,” Smart News, 28 March 2017 <<http://bit.ly/2r8EYEG>>.

37 Alaa Nasser, Bahira al-Zarier, Madeline Edwards, “Why I chose to leave and why I chose to stay: Two voices from town now under government control, both of regret,” Syria Direct, 18 April 2017, <syriadirect.org>.



Syrian soldiers and SARC visible from loaded buses during Madaya forced population transfer. 14 April 2017

"This is **the worst feeling** I have experienced **in my whole life**. It feels **unreal** that suddenly the order is given to **leave your home**, your town, your village, to leave **your memories** of childhood and family behind."

A Madaya resident describes his feelings about the forced population transfer. 11 April 2017

Moadamiya – In late October 2016, Moadamiya surrendered to the government after weeks of threats and negotiations. Starting on 19 October, approximately 3,000 people were forcibly transferred to Idlib. Several additional smaller rounds of deportation have taken place since then. As in other areas, local Siege Watch contacts were deported during the forced population transfers and the area essentially “went dark,” with subsequent developments difficult to monitor. According to third party reports and follow up conversations with displaced Siege Watch contacts with relatives still inside of Moadamiya, living conditions have greatly improved for those remaining, but have not yet normalized. Running water was finally restored to the city on 19 February 2017, but trash collection had not yet been restored by March.³⁸ The fear of possible detention still prevents some men from traveling through the checkpoints.

The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities like Moadamiya on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

Khan al-Shieh – Armed opposition groups in the “Watchlist” community of Khan al-Shieh surrendered to government forces in mid-November in the face of intensified Russian and Syrian attacks, and several thousand people were transferred to Idlib under the agreement terms.

As in other surrender deals in besieged and “Watchlist” areas monitored by the project, all Siege Watch contacts in Khan al-Shieh – generally civil society actors and media activists – were deported during the forced population transfer, and afterwards the area essentially “went dark,” becoming exceedingly difficult to get information out of. Available information gathered from third party reports and displaced Siege Watch contacts with family members still inside suggest that living conditions have improved somewhat but have not normalized, and serious human rights abuses have taken place.

For the first month after its surrender, Khan al-Shieh remained completely restricted, essentially under siege but with the added threat of pro-government arrests. After around a month, limited food was allowed in. Siege Watch received reports of the arrests and forced conscription of young men into the Syrian military, where they are generally sent to the active front lines.

There has been rampant looting of homes in Khan al-Shieh by pro-government forces, and a number of people have been detained during sporadic raids by security services. There was a partial restoration of access to basic services, although there remained some limitations on movement for people and goods.³⁹ Most families displaced from Khan al-Shieh during the preceding violence have still not been allowed to return.

The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities like Khan al-Shieh on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

38 Alaa Nassar, Reham Toujan, Adam a-Shami, Jessica Page, “The aftermath of surrender: One Damascus suburb drowns in uncollected garbage,” Syria Direct, 9 March 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

39 Palestinian Refugees Portal, “إدخال غاز الطهي لمخيم خان الشيع في ظل استمرار معاناة الأهالي رغم المصالحة,” 27 March 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2r7kkW7>>; Palestinian Refugees Portal, “تقرير : أربع سنوات على نكبة مخيم خان الشيع,” 13 March 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2q0Ft46>>.

Al-Tal – The Siege Watch “Watchlist” community of al-Tal was briefly brought under full siege during the previous reporting period before ultimately surrendering to the Syrian government. On 22 November 2016, pro-government forces attacked the city, breaking a longstanding truce. The violence intensified on 28 November after the local negotiating committee rejected the government’s surrender terms until al-Tal surrendered a week later. On 2 December 2016, an estimated 2,000-3,000 people were transferred to Idlib on government green buses under Syrian Red Crescent supervision. Around 760 of the forcibly displaced were women and children. The displaced included fighters, their families, and community members such as media activists.

As in other areas, local Siege Watch contacts were deported during the forced population transfers and the area essentially “went dark,” making subsequent developments difficult to monitor. Reports from third party media outlets suggest that conditions in the post-surrender community have not yet normalized and there remains a real threat of civilian abuse by controlling pro-government forces.⁴⁰ Among these was an unconfirmed report that a Palestinian IDP displaced to al-Tal died in April because he was unable to access medical care.⁴¹

The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities like al-Tal on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

Al-Hameh and Qudsaya – The Siege Watch “Watchlist” communities of al-Hameh and Qudsaya both surrendered in mid-October of 2016 after the government briefly brought the cities under full siege, completely cutting off access, and broke long-standing truces by launching violent attacks. As in other areas, local Siege Watch contacts were deported during the forced population transfers and both al-Hameh and Qudsaya essentially “went dark,” with subsequent developments difficult to monitor.

The Local Council for Qudsaya has continued to exist in exile in Idlib. Its primary mission now is to provide for the needs of the displaced former residents of Qudsaya. A similar shift in mission has been observed in Local Councils for several, although not all, of the other post-surrender communities.

Reports from displaced contacts with family members still inside Qudsaya and al-Hameh suggest that the communities have reverted to a sort of dystopian pre-war status. While living conditions have improved, residents cannot speak openly about the situation there, and there is a fear that ultimately the pro-government militias will take revenge on those who remain. The vast majority of the men are IDPs from other areas, as original male residents have been displaced or conscripted. High on the list of concerns for those remaining is the threat of arbitrary arrests, which have been intermittently reported.⁴² The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities like al-Hameh and Qudsaya on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

40 Sowt al-Asima, “مدينة التل “حارة كل مين أيدو الو”, 26 March 2017, <damascusv.com>; Bahira al-Zarier, Alaa Nassar, Jessica Page and Kristen Demilio, “Post-surrender regret in Damascus suburb: ‘Everyone who lost sons and daughters to this revolution will never view Assad as anything but a criminal’,” Syria Direct, 18 January 2017, <syriadirect.org>; Sowt al-Asima, “مليشيات الأمد تعبت”, 8 April 2017, <damascusv.com>; Sowt al-Asima, “مليشيات الأمد تعبت”, 12 March 2017, <damascusv.com>.

41 Action Group for Palestinians, “Two Palestinian Refugee Die in Syria, one of them due to Al-Tal Siege in Damascus Suburb,” 19 May 2017, <actionpal.org.uk/en>.

42 Local Council of Qudsaya, Facebook Post, 2 March 2017, <<http://bit.ly/QudsayaLC>>.

Wadi Barada – The Siege Watch “Watchlist” enclave of Wadi Barada surrendered in January 2017, a month after pro-government forces broke a multi-year truce and launched a major offensive against the area. Two out of the approximately dozen towns in Wadi Barada – Ein al-Fijeh and Bassema – were destroyed during the month-long assault, and their entire populations were displaced either to other villages in Wadi Barada or to Idlib in the forced displacement transfer.

As in other surrender deals in besieged and “Watchlist” areas monitored by the project, Siege Watch contacts in Wadi Barada – generally civil society actors and media activists – were deported during the forced population transfer, and the area essentially “went dark,” becoming exceedingly difficult to get information out of. Not only are those remaining too afraid to post things online, but they also do not have frequent access to the internet.

Follow-up communications with displaced Siege Watch contacts that have relatives still in Wadi Barada suggest that while the short-lived siege has been lifted, conditions have not normalized and the remaining civilians are facing a campaign of harassment and abuse by pro-government forces. These abuses are used as punishments against the communities that fought hardest and were captured by force, and are experienced much less by people in towns that surrendered quickly without a fight. The most northwestern towns of Souq Wadi Barada, Bara Laya, and Kafr al-Awamid were the ones that fared best in this new system, while the towns of Ein Fijeh and Bassema have fared worse.

These two towns were captured by force and largely destroyed. None of their residents have been allowed to return, and through communications with friends in the NDF, people from those towns know that their homes have been burned down, belongings looted, and properties destroyed. Some residents claimed to witness the pro-government forces burning buildings holding local land, property, and civil records. After this, several more families bribed the Hezbollah and National Defense Forces (NDF) forces in order to leave Wadi Barada.

The pro-government forces exercising control over the Wadi Barada enclave consist primarily of Hezbollah and NDF militias. In addition to the widespread looting, the homes of some of the displaced have been burned or blown up.⁴³ There is believed to be ongoing destruction of property especially in Bassema and Ein Fijeh. Civilians were verbally harassed and the NDF militias have reportedly targeted specific people and families, breaking into their homes and burning down fruit trees, restaurants, shops, and other economic resources as a way to force more people to leave Wadi Barada. Numerous aspects of the surrender agreement have been violated, including terms that allowed for a waiting period before males would have to serve their mandatory military service, and for the return of displaced families into the area.

While the roads are relatively open, many are afraid to go through the checkpoints due to the reports of civilians, including women and children, being arrested. As of mid-April, an estimated 45-50 people had been arrested who were related to fighters that had been deported to Idlib in January were reportedly detained by pro-government forces. The Syrian government has been using the detainees as hostages, demanding that their family member(s) in Idlib turn themselves in to pro-government forces in order to secure their release. Wadi Barada is the only location where this tactic of using civilians as leverage against their displaced family members has been reported, and it is unknown whether it has been applied in any other post-surrender communities.

43 Rayan Mohammad, “تراصل تجير وتجرىف المنازل بنبع الفيجة يهدد عودة الأهالي,” Al-Araby al-Jadid, 21 February 2017, <www.alaraby.co.uk>.

A small convoy of food aid was delivered by the SARC to Wadi Barada on 2 February, and a larger multi-sectorial aid convoy reached the area on 24 March. Reports received by Siege Watch indicate that this aid was delivered to controlling NDF authorities for distribution, but that it was distributed only to their own supporters. While Siege Watch cannot properly verify this accusation due to the difficulty of getting information out of the area, it would be consistent with the ongoing harassment campaign targeting civilians who stayed behind.

The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities like Wadi Barada on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased access to information on current conditions, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

Homs

Map 3:

Besieged Communities in Hom

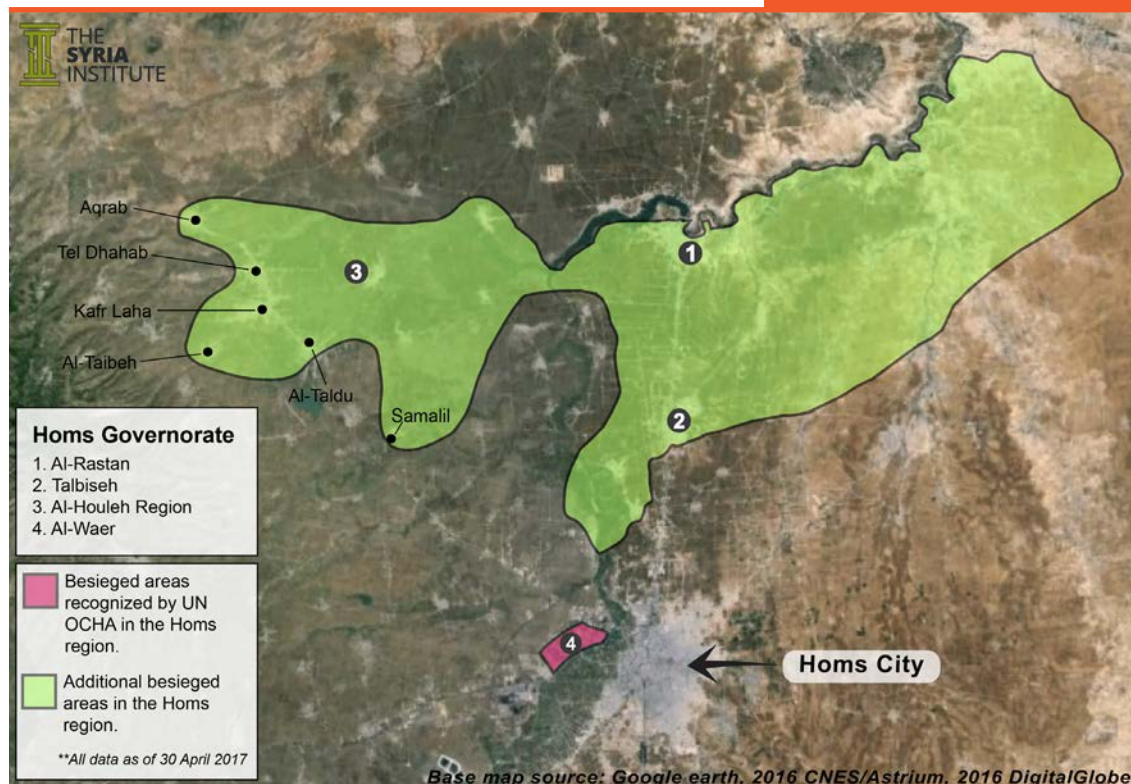


Table 3:

Homs Governorate Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Waer	1	Syrian Govt.	46,900
Al-Houleh Region +	3	Syrian Govt.	75,000
Al-Rastan +	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
Talbiseh +	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
SUM:			306,900

Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of April 2017.

Snapshot:

Conditions in the besieged enclaves of the northern Homs countryside fluctuated throughout the reporting period but remained poor overall. As a result of the critical situation precipitated by ongoing pro-government attacks, al-Waer capitulated to government surrender terms, and

population transfers began out of the besieged neighborhood during the reporting period. The population estimates for al-Waer and Talbiseh have been lowered slightly. No changes in Tier levels were deemed necessary.

Details:

During the February – April reporting period, the Homs city neighborhood of al-Waer surrendered after being subjected to prolonged heavy attacks by pro-government forces. The sieges of the Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh enclaves in the northern Homs countryside remained in place, and all areas were subjected to attacks throughout the period. These sieges in northern Homs are enforced by Syrian armed forces and an array of affiliated groups including the Syrian National Defense Force militias, Iran-backed foreign militias, Hezbollah, and Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces. To date, none of the besieged areas in northern Homs are designated as besieged by the UN.

NORTHERN HOMS GOVERNORATE

The besieged northern countryside areas of Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh encompass two main cities, several villages and a large expanse of rural land. In many ways, the situation is similar to that of Eastern Ghouta, which is also a large besieged area encompassing both rural and urban areas. Pro-government forces, primarily militias, have surrounded the besieged communities of northern Homs for approximately four years.

While violence against the region continued throughout the reporting period, al-Houleh was attacked much more intensively than al-Rastan and Talbiseh. Civilians trapped in these areas rely on local food production and smuggling for survival, as well as some pro-government traders who sell limited supplies for high prices at checkpoints. The checkpoint trade is more reliable in al-Rastan and Talbiseh, but even there it is irregular and subject to unpredictable price increases and shutdowns. For example, in early March, pro-government Iranian militias temporarily closed off trade at the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint – the primary lifeblood for the besieged al-Rastan and Talbiseh areas. The looming crisis precipitated by the closure pushed local authorities in northern Homs to threaten that opposition groups would cut government access to the Mayasaf crossing which links government-controlled Homs city to the coast.

All of the besieged communities in northern Homs reported serious problems with securing clean water during the reporting period. Unless they receive support, these water issues may lead to a humanitarian disaster during the summer months.

Insufficient medical care remains a serious concern in northern Homs. There are believed to be a number of people in all of these areas who have died due to chronic medical conditions after failing to receive permission from the Syrian government to seek treatment outside of the besieged area. As described by a contact in al-Rastan, these patients end up dying at home and being buried nearby without proper documentation of their deaths. Siege Watch has made minor adjustments to population figures, although new high confidence estimates were not available.

Al-Rastan and Talbiseh – Contacts in al-Rastan and Talbiseh reported a notable decrease in attacks by pro-government forces over the reporting period.

Talbiseh and al-Rastan each received two aid deliveries, and al-Houleh received one. The first of two convoys to reach Talbiseh during the February – April period arrived on 5 February 2017 and

consisted of 31 trucks with food, medicine, and other items reportedly sufficient for 84,000 people for nearly a month. According to the UN, government forces removed 2,300 medical treatments from the convoy.⁴⁴ On 27 March, a second convoy reached Talbiseh with food and medical aid for about 84,500 people for a single month. According to the UN, government forces removed 2,837 medical kits and nutrition treatments from the convoy.⁴⁵

The first interagency convoy to reach al-Rastan arrived on 13 February 2017 with food, water, and health aid intended for 107,500 people. According to the UN, pro-government forces removed 2,538 medical treatments from the convoy.⁴⁶ A second convoy on 30 March also brought aid for 107,500 people, but the food had been improperly stored and much was inedible; what remained was barely enough to last ten days.⁴⁷ Additionally, the delivery lacked sanitation supplies. According to the UN, government forces removed 4,178 medical and hygiene kits from the convoy.⁴⁸

Talbiseh and al-Rastan both struggled to pump enough water for their populations, with al-Rastan finally releasing a distress call to the international community. The lack of electricity or fuel halted water pump functionality. Pro-government strikes targeted the water systems, causing severe damage to both pumps and pipes. Al-Rastan reported the lack of water caused the spread of disease and disrupted the community's sewage system. The lack of clean drinking water is expected to cause even more problems as summer approaches.

Residents in the al-Rastan area are facing increased challenges in local production due to an unprecedented lowering of the water level in the al-Rastan levee. This falling water level has made crops more difficult for farmers to irrigate, and depleted the fish stock in the levee. Most people believe that this is intentional, the result of government efforts to cut the flow of water upstream of the besieged area. Additionally, the Local Council in al-Rastan continued to struggle to find the external support that it needs to run and maintain pumping stations for the production of drinking water for the population. Tens of thousands of civilians are at risk.⁴⁹ In Talbiseh, there was reportedly a coup against the previous Shura Council. As a result, a new Shura Council was installed that is no longer elected by the people of Talbiseh.

Al-Houleh – Pro-government attacks against al-Houleh region increased during the reporting period, with several waves of intense violence leading to civilian deaths and injuries, along with significant infrastructure destruction. The single remaining dirt road that connects al-Houleh to the al-Rastan and Talbiseh pockets was frequently targeted by shelling from pro-government forces in nearby villages, though the crossing was quiet for a few days during the quarter.

44 UN Security Council, S/2017/244, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016)," 22 March 2017 <www.un.org>.

45 UN Security Council, S/2017/339, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016)," 19 April 2017, <www.un.org>.

46 UN Security Council, S/2017/244, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016)," 22 March 2017 <www.un.org>.

47 Smart News, "شكاوى أهالي مدينة الرستن بحمص من سوء تخزين المساعدات الغذائية," 6 April 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2qaiYWp>>.

48 UN Security Council, S/2017/339, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016)," 19 April 2017, <www.un.org>.

49 Radio al Kul, "رئيس المجلس المحلي في الرستن: توقف مضخات المياه عن العمل بسبب توقف الدعم وقلة المواد التشغيلية," 17 April 2017, <www.radioalkul.com>.



Remains of a mosque bombed two days in a row in al-Taldu, Houleh. 26 April 2017

During the first week of February, al-Houleh area was targeted with intense airstrikes and shelling for three consecutive days. Following this onslaught, on 6 February armed groups in al-Houleh met with government representatives to discuss the creation of a humanitarian corridor near the Samalil village. The group agreed to allow humanitarian supplies to enter the area without signing a forced surrender agreement. Government representatives issued certificates to merchants who wanted to move food and aid supplies through the Samalil Corridor. Employees and students were also permitted to move through the corridor, as long as they carried written permission. The corridor did not last for long. Within a week, several people from the besieged areas had been arrested after leaving al-Houleh through the corridor, food and aid were no longer permitted to cross, and the area was once again targeted with attacks by pro-government forces.

Starting on 23 April 2017, Syrian and Russian aircraft launched a wave of airstrikes against al-Houleh communities including al-Taldu, Aqrab, Kafr Laha, Tel Dhahab, and al-Taibeh. The onslaught lasted for four days, and an unknown number of civilians were killed and wounded. More than 37 airstrikes were reported in the first two hours, many of them dropped vacuum and parachute bombs. Markets and schools in the targeted areas closed for the week, and water wells stopped pumping. On 26 April, a parachute missile targeted a bakery in Kafr Laha, taking it out of service. A mosque in al-Taldu was reportedly bombed on two consecutive days on 25-26 April, and ultimately destroyed.

A 66-truck interagency aid convoy reached al-Houleh on 13 April 2017 with aid for 89,000 people.

According to the UN, 27,111 medical treatments were removed from the convoy.⁵⁰ Despite this aid, contacts reported a rise in prices during the reporting period in al-Houleh as a result of the intensified bombardment and failure of the Samalil Corridor effort.

AL-WAER

Conditions in al-Waer were dire at the start of the reporting period as the intensification of attacks reported in the prior quarter continued. At the same time, food and medical supplies dwindled for trapped civilians, pushing the neighborhood to the brink of complete humanitarian disaster. These tactics, along with intimidation and threat, were intended to force the neighborhood to surrender to the government. Prior agreements had repeatedly stalled over the issue of the release of detainees.

Significant attacks leading up to the surrender of al-Waer on 13 March:

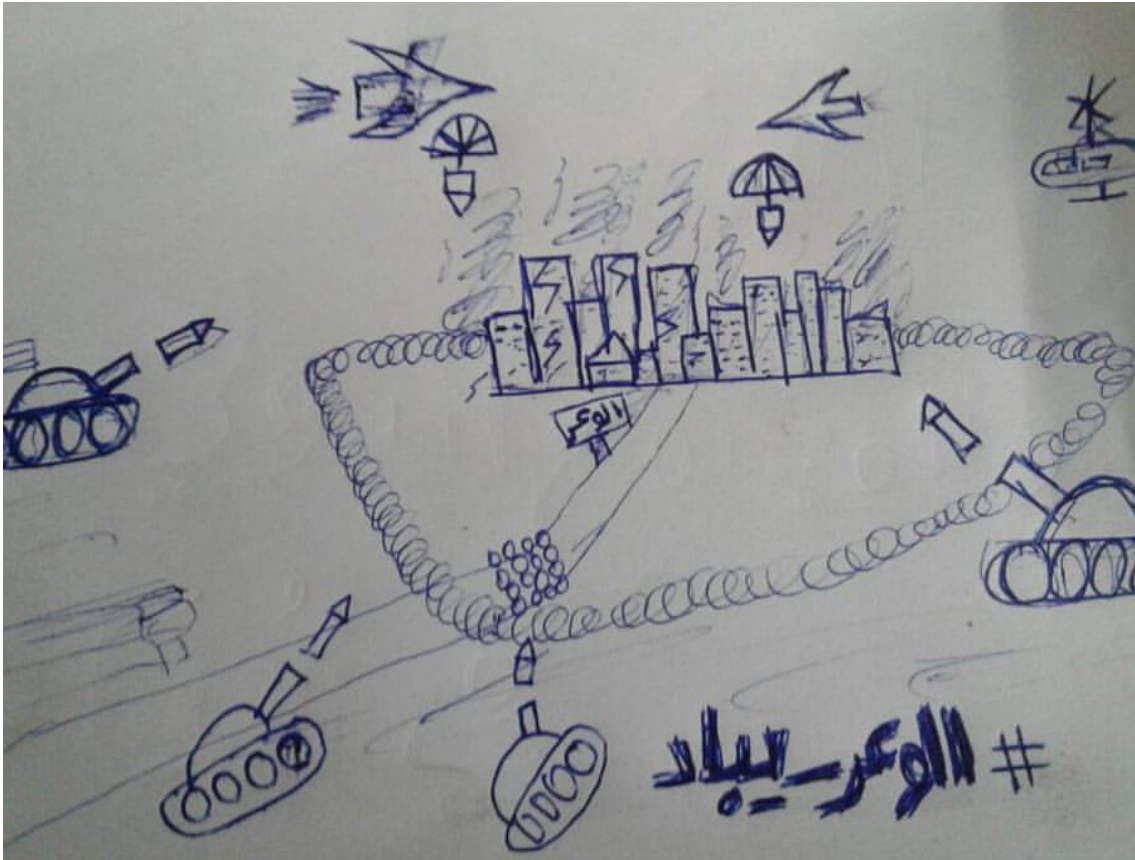
- ◆ 8 February – 11 civilians were killed – including 3 children and 3 women – and 45 were injured during the second day of intensified attacks against al-Waer, marking the start of several weeks of escalation.
- ◆ 17 February – At least 12 airstrikes launched by Russian Sukhoi jets hit the neighborhood. Two people were killed and there was massive infrastructure damage.
- ◆ 25 February – Al-Waer was hit with more than 40 airstrikes, 55 cluster munitions, and constant shelling in a single day during an intense wave of attacks.
- ◆ 6 March – Al-Waer was hit with 18 airstrikes during a wave of intensified attacks in early March. Two people were killed and more than 25 injured. Twelve of the airstrikes were launched after a meeting between the al-Waer negotiating committee and Russians negotiators.

Starting on 11 February, the medical staff in the neighborhood began issuing distress calls to the international community due to the lack of medical supplies, rapidly declining with the high number of injuries. Medical staff reported 14 moderate and two severe cases of malnutrition. On 20 February, a UN interagency humanitarian aid convoy destined for al-Waer failed to reach its destination. While en route it was fired at and looted by pro-government forces. Contacts report that 22 out of the 35 aid trucks were diverted by al-Ridha militia group (a sectarian pro-government Shia militia supported by Iran, known as the Syrian Hezbollah), and offloaded in government-controlled Mazraa area.

On the brink of collapse, al-Waer surrendered to government terms on 13 March. The deal was reportedly negotiated by Russian mediators who used similar threat tactics reportedly used by Syrian government negotiators in other localities, promising that the neighborhood would be annihilated if it refused to surrender.⁵¹ The final agreement called for the forced transfer of somewhere between 12,000 to 20,000 people – more than two thirds of them civilians – out of

⁵⁰ UN Security Council, S/2017/445, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016)," 23 May 2017, <www.un.org>.

⁵¹ SyriaSource "Forced from Home," the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, 28 March 2017, <interactive.acharircenter.org>.



A girl in al-Waer's drawing prior to surrender



Building damaged in attacks on al-Waer. 17 February 2017

al-Waer to opposition-controlled areas in weekly batches of around 1,500 people each. Following the completion of transfers, Russian forces would enter and secure the neighborhood. The deal included some provisions clearly designed to assuage fears of abuses happening elsewhere, such as a clause promising that nobody would be arrested after the deal for having a relative who was wanted by the government.

Prior negotiations to end the siege of al-Waer had repeatedly fallen through when the Syrian government failed to release detainees as promised. In order to finalize the deal on 13 March, the local negotiating committee was forced to give up its long-held insistence on the release of detainees.

"Very sad. Very devastated. In
excruciating pain. I feel abandoned.
**I feel betrayed by the international
community,** for us **this crime will
not be forgotten.** They are forcing me
to leave my city, my neighborhood,
and my house. **Forcing me to leave
my memories, my dreams,
and my hopes."**

Siege Watch contact from al-Waer describing his feelings about the population transfers. 14 March 2017



Residents of al-Waer board a bus to Jarablus during first population transfer. 18 March 2017

A list of al-Waer population transfers during the reporting period: ⁵²

1. 18 March – Around 1,400 hundred were transferred to Jarablus, Aleppo.
2. 27 March – After a two-day delay, around 2,000 people were transferred to Jarablus, Aleppo.
3. 1 April – Around 1,900 people were transferred to Idlib.
4. 9 April – Around 2,200 people were transferred to Jarablus, Aleppo.
5. 17 April – Around 1,900 people were transferred to Jarablus, Aleppo.
6. 24 April – Around 1,500 people were transferred to Jarablus, Aleppo.
7. 30 April – Around 2,200 people were transferred to Idlib.

[Note: The transfers continued into May, with the tenth and final batch loading onto buses on 19 May 2017. Pro-government forces held up the final convoy for more than 36-hours at a checkpoint on the outskirts of the city, before finally allowing them to continue on 21 May. After the buses departed, Russian forces reportedly entered the neighborhood.]

⁵² Note: The estimates of the number of individuals included in each transfer are approximate, as different sources reported varying figures.



Children prepare to travel to Jarablus during fifth population transfer out of al-Waer. 17 April 2017

"I feel a sense of
abandonment.
I feel that **humanity**
has failed us."

Siege Watch contact from al-Waer describing his feelings about the population transfers, 20 March 2017

The final number of people transferred out of al-Waer – and the number remaining – is unclear. It appears that during the transfer process, more and more people decided to leave the area, and the last few convoys were larger than originally expected. According to one contact, the

Russian negotiators, concerned with the high percentage of people who wanted to leave al-Waer, sent an official from the Hmeimeem base to meet with residents in an unsuccessful attempt to reassure them of Russian guarantees to maintain security following the transfer process, and protect remaining civilians from government and militia abuses. This dynamic is consistent with experiences reported by several other besieged areas – notably Moadamiya and Madaya – where Russian mediators were uncomfortable with the high number of people who wanted to leave once the surrender was agreed.

The displaced al-Waer residents who ended up in IDP camps in both Aleppo and Idlib encountered poor living conditions. The camp near Jarablus, Idlib that has been set up for the IDPs reportedly has insufficient tents, forcing some families to live outside. Turkish AFAD is supposed to be responsible for supplying the camp but has not been providing the required aid. For those in Idlib who do not have family or friends to stay with, the situation is equally bad. The population of Idlib has ballooned in the past year and areas hosting IDPs are overcrowded and undersupplied. Poor humanitarian conditions are made worse by the ongoing airstrikes and sporadic tensions between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition factions. *[Note: Al-Waer remained on the besieged list during the reporting period, but was reclassified to the "Watchlist" in late May following the end of the transfers as the neighborhood reverted to the control of pro-government forces.]*

Deir Ezzor

Map 4:

Besieged Neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor

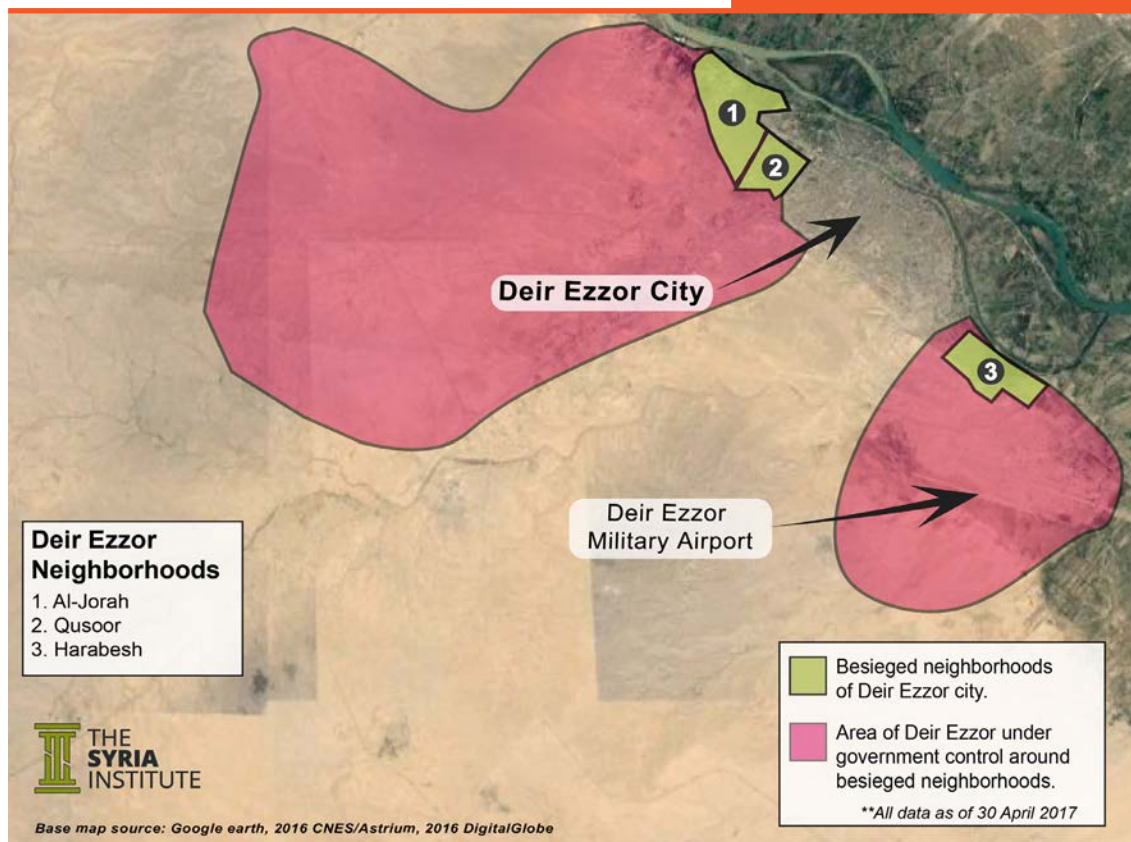


Table 4:

Deir Ezzor Besieged Neighborhoods

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Deir Ezzor (besieged neighborhoods)	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	72,000

Snapshot:

Conditions in besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor declined during the February – April reporting period, particularly in the isolated Harabesh neighborhood. As a result, the Siege Watch Tier level has been upgraded to level 2. There were no changes to population estimates.

Details:

Besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city have been surrounded by ISIS forces since the start of 2015. The neighborhoods are controlled by Syrian government forces, which regulate

humanitarian aid distribution and restrict civilians from fleeing the neighborhoods. Many people consider themselves to be besieged by both ISIS and the government due to perceived abuses and restrictions emplaced on besieged civilians by the government forces. Despite continuing airdrops of food and supplies, the medical sector in Deir Ezzor has been devastated, and humanitarian conditions declined throughout the reporting period in all of the besieged neighborhoods. Conditions declined most notably in Harabesh, which has not received supplies from the airdrops since mid-January, and serious malnutrition is increasingly a concern. Deir Ezzor has been upgraded to a 'Tier 2' intensity siege to reflect the deteriorating conditions.

The besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor have received regular WFP-led airdrops of food supplies since in April 2016. The airdrops were temporarily disrupted during the prior reporting period when an ISIS offensive severed the road to the Deir Ezzor Military Airport. This advance cut the besieged enclave in two and isolated the Harabesh neighborhood and the airport on the east, from most of the besieged population in al-Jorah and Qusoor neighborhoods to the west. WFP identified a new airdrop location under government control in the western part of the enclave and resumed airdrops at the end of January 2017.

The humanitarian conditions in Harabesh deteriorated significantly during the reporting period as a result of its isolation from the other part of the enclave. Without access to international deliveries, the civilians in Harabesh are relying on small amounts of local agriculture and some pre-stocked food supplies that are being sold out of the Deir Ezzor airport for exorbitant prices. Food supplies ran so low that the neighborhood put out an SOS call in mid-April.⁵³ Malnutrition has become increasingly widespread, and there were unconfirmed reports that a woman in Harabesh died due to the lack of access to nutrition and medical treatment.⁵⁴

As in previous reporting periods, government forces and affiliated pro-government militias continued to appropriate large portions of the international assistance intended for besieged civilians that is provided in the WFP airdrops. Additionally, the besieged areas continued to receive airdrops of supplies from Russian and Syrian aircraft, but these are used almost exclusively for military resupply, despite the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Some of the supplies shipped in by Syrian aircraft belong to government-connected traders who pay the government aircraft to fly in the goods, which they then sell at inflated prices in local markets.

No medical assistance has reached the besieged areas of Deir Ezzor since 14 August 2016, and there is a severe lack of medical supplies in all of the besieged neighborhoods. According to Siege Watch contacts, in the western neighborhoods there were at least two siege-related deaths due to the lack of medical supplies and staff: Hashem al-Akel died on 3 February 2017 and Hussein Khalouf al-Fandi died 11 February 2017, although the number is likely higher. There are additional reports that a number of infants have died shortly after birth due to the poor conditions in the local hospital.

ISIS continued to target the besieged neighborhoods intermittently throughout the reporting period, leading to civilian deaths and injuries. Pro-government forces continued to prevent civilians from fleeing the besieged area. Deir Ezzor's population level did not change significantly during the February – April 2017 reporting period.

53 Justice for Life Organization (JFL), "The Besieged Neighborhood of Harabesh Sends a Disaster Call Due to Absence of Food," 14 April 2017, <jfl.ngo>.

54 Justice for Life Organization (JFL), "Bombardment on several positions in Deir Ezzor... And the continuing suffering of the besieged people," 17 April 2017, <jfl.ngo>.

Map 5:

Besieged Neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor

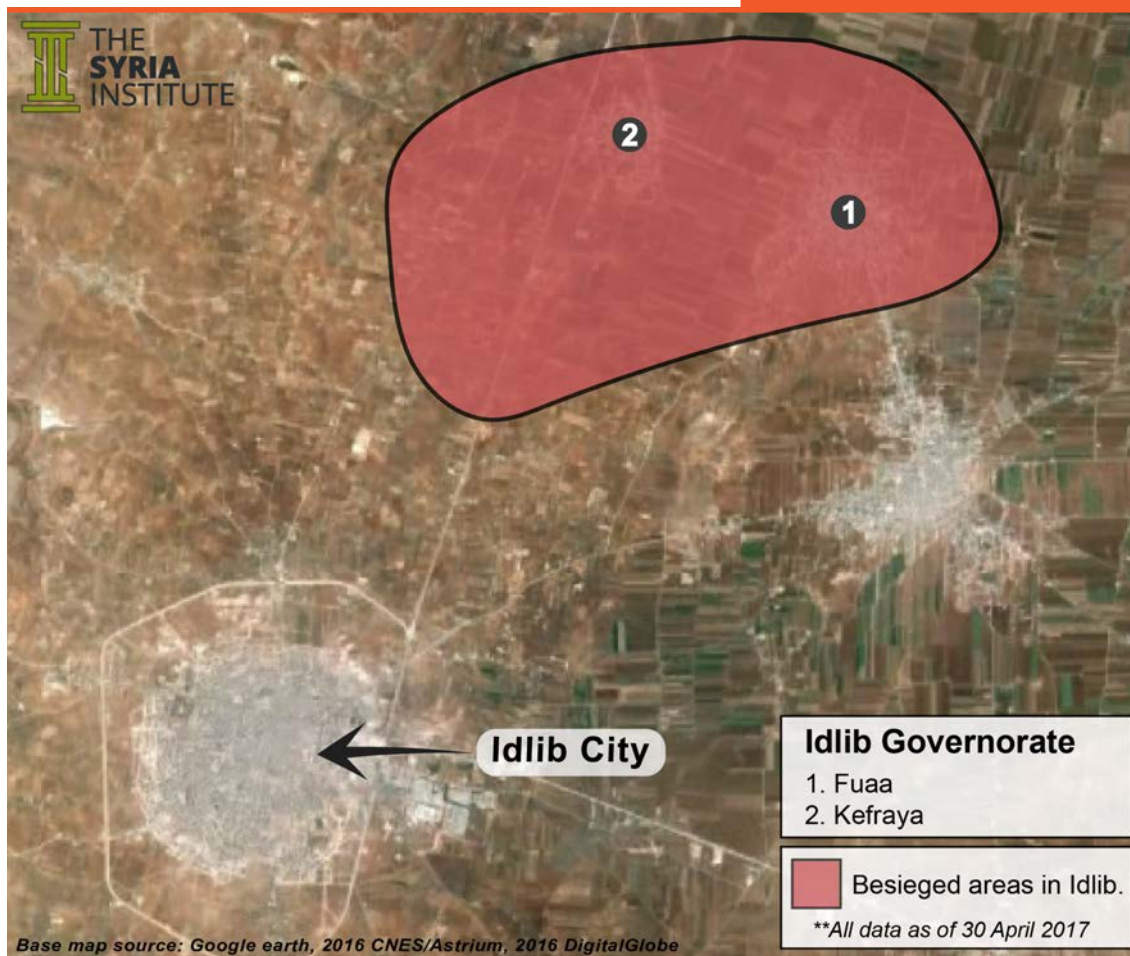


Table 5:

Idlib Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Fuaa and Kefraya	3	Armed groups	10,800

Snapshot:

No change in besieged designation or tier level. Population estimate lowered following first stage of “Four Towns” agreement population transfers in April.

Details:

The government-controlled towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remained besieged by armed opposition groups and HTS throughout the February – April reporting period. On 14 March, the towns were reached by an interagency UN/ICRC shipment of humanitarian aid containing food and medical supplies in return for a similar shipment reaching the besieged areas of Madaya and Zabadani in Rural Damascus.⁵⁵ According to the UN, 9,709 medical treatments were removed from the convoy.⁵⁶ Several medical emergency cases were reportedly evacuated.

On 28 March, reports arose that an agreement had been reached to bring a new ceasefire to Madaya, Zabadani, Fuaa, and Kefraya. The new “Four Towns” deal was reportedly negotiated and backed by Iran and Qatar and was done directly with armed groups, cutting out local civilian authorities. According to various media reports, the multi-step agreement would result in the deportation of all of the remaining population of Fuaa, Kefraya, and Zabadani (where only fighters remained), and around half of the population of Madaya, in addition to the release of a number of government detainees.⁵⁷

In mid-April, the first stage of the agreement took place after nearly two weeks of delays reportedly caused by the logistical challenges of moving so many people. On 14 April, an estimated 5,000 people were transported out of Fuaa and Kefraya. During the loading process, armed opposition groups launched mortars at the buses, injuring two civilians from Fuaa. They were taken for treatment and the convoy proceeded to a holding area in Rashideen on the outskirts of Aleppo, where the Fuaa and Kefraya deportees were to be transferred to government custody concurrently with the transfer of deportees from Madaya on 15 April. After arriving in Rashideen, the buses were forced to wait overnight during an unexplained delay. The next day, a suicide bombing targeted the buses full of displaced deportees, killing more than 100 people.

Although no official party has been named as responsible for the attack, multiple eyewitnesses reported that the vehicle that exploded was a Syrian government aid truck that was handing out bags of chips to children. Attack victims were raced to multiple hospitals in both government and opposition controlled territories. Later in the evening, the remainder of the convoy was allowed to proceed to an IDP processing center in government-controlled Jibreen.

On 19 April, another population transfer of approximately 3,000 people left Fuaa and Kefraya for the Jibreen center in Aleppo.

As of the end of the reporting period there were still several thousand residents remaining in the two towns, and control had not been transferred over to the besieging opposition forces. Accordingly, Fuaa and Kefraya currently remain on the besieged list. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation and reclassify the communities should developments warrant it.

شبكة اخبار الفوعة و كفرية >: <<http://bit.ly/NZFK1>>, Facebook Post, 15 March 2017, (Besieged Fuaa and Kefraya News Network),

المحاصرتين (Besieged Fuaa and Kefraya News Network), Facebook Post, 15 March 2017, <<http://bit.ly/NZFK4>>.

56 UN Security Council, S/2017/339, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016),” 19 April 2017, <www.un.org>.

57 Ahlam Selamat, “هدنة جديدة في ريفي إدلب ودمشق تتضمن إخلاء عدة مناطق من سكانها,” Smart News, 28 March 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>; All4Syria,

“إخلاء تام للفوعة وكفرية... قائد (أحرار الشام) في الزبداني يكشف تفاصيل الاتفاق الجديد,” 28 March 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.



The aftermath of the Rashideen attack on deportees from Fuaa & Kefraya. 15 April 2017



Victims of the Rashideen attack on deportees from Fuaa & Kefraya. 15 April 2017

Aleppo

Following a devastating scorched earth campaign by pro-government forces during the prior reporting period, control of the besieged eastern Aleppo city enclave reverted to pro-government forces. The final offensive was launched in mid-November and continued without pause until the shrinking pocket finally collapsed in mid-December 2016. Barrel bombs, chemical weapons, cluster munitions, bunker busters, and civilian massacres were among the documented tactics used to cause near-apocalyptic destruction in eastern Aleppo. During the offensive, eastern Aleppo's infrastructure was destroyed, hospitals systematically targeted, and the majority of its remaining residents were displaced, killed, arrested, or forcibly transferred out of the city.

All Siege Watch contacts from eastern Aleppo were displaced or deported in advance of the area's capture, making ensuing developments in the city difficult to monitor. In follow-up communications, displaced contacts reported that a number of people who attempted to return to eastern Aleppo in early 2017 due to the poor living conditions in the western Aleppo countryside, encountered persecution from the pro-government militias now in control of the neighborhoods and were forced to flee a second time.

Following the capture of eastern Aleppo by pro-government forces in December, the community was reclassified from besieged to "Watchlist." The Siege Watch project will keep post-surrender communities on the "Watchlist" for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations.

For a more detailed accounting of the fall of eastern Aleppo see the Fifth Quarterly Siege Watch report covering the November 2016 – January 2017 period, and the Atlantic Council's "Breaking Aleppo" report.⁵⁸

58 PAX and The Syria institute, "Siege Watch – Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria: November 2016 – January 2017," March 2017, <siegewatch.org>; The Atlantic Council, "Breaking Aleppo," February 2017, <www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org>.

Daraa

On 28 March, Siege Watch added the town of Muhajja in Daraa governorate to the “Watchlist” for the first time. Reports received during the previous quarter indicated that several towns in Daraa were potentially under siege by pro-government forces starting as early as 27 December 2016. By March 2017, Siege Watch felt confident enough in the collected data to state that Muhajja did appear to be facing siege conditions. The determination was made to place it on the “Watchlist” while further evidence was collected, noting that a Tier 3 siege designation may have been appropriate. Meanwhile the other towns of concern – Ghabaghib and Sanamayn – appear to have surrendered to government forces in the early months of the year.

Muhajja is an opposition-controlled town in government-held territory in Daraa. It has reportedly faced some level of restriction for the past four years, but bribery made it possible to bring in even medical supplies, which are among the most restricted items by government forces nationwide. On 27 December 2016, pro-government forces completely shut down access to Muhajja via government-controlled checkpoints on the four main access routes into the town. Since then there have been ongoing negotiation efforts through a middleman from Sanamayn, with the government attempting to impose forced surrender terms similar to those seen elsewhere. There is some indication that the government negotiators attempted to tie a surrender agreement for Muhajja to the “Four Towns” agreement.

The population of Muhajja is approximately 25,000 people. The besieging forces consist of Syrian army forces in addition to some foreign Lebanese, Iraqi, and Afghan militia fighters. FSA-affiliated local fighters and a civilian-led Local Council exercise internal control.

Around 12 April, negotiations established the partial opening of the Najih checkpoint into Muhajja. Under the deal, some commercial goods were sold to local markets at extremely inflated prices, although some critical supplies such as wheat flour and diesel fuel are still prohibited. Some individuals such as women, university students, and government employees were allowed to leave and enter through the checkpoint. Only a small percentage of the population was able to take advantage of this relaxation of movement restrictions, with a rough estimate of 300-400 people using the checkpoints each day. Returnees were restricted in the type and amount of food they are able to bring back with them. Some critical medical cases were allowed to seek treatment outside, although many requests were still turned down during the reporting period.

The siege of Muhajja shares some of the basic features associated with other sieges waged by the Syrian military. Notably, movement of civilians and supplies into and out of the town was halted, causing basic supplies to run low by the end of March. The conditions placed on the limited access at the Muhajja checkpoint since mid-April also mirror similar circumstances in other besieged areas at various points in time. However, the siege of Muhajja has several unique characteristics that set it apart from other sieges in Syria, suggesting that the government’s siege and surrender strategy has evolved.

The starkest contrast between Muhajja and other sieges monitored by the Siege Watch project is that the movement and access restrictions have not been accompanied by violence. In other besieged communities, violent attacks, particularly against civilian targets, are a central part of the Syrian government’s collective punishment strategy. The attacks not only aim to undermine population support for armed opposition groups, but to push the besieged communities to a

crisis point much quicker by destroying critical infrastructure such as hospitals and bakeries.

Another difference between Muhajja and other besieged areas is the relative lack of information and images flowing out of the town. Even early reporting by the Local Council on its own social media page has died down since February. This is not an accident: a local Siege Watch contact described the reluctance of locals to post media showing their siege conditions online because when they do, they face retribution from the Syrian government forces. Government forces have previously rejected medical evacuation requests, citing the posting of a specific video or report on conditions in Muhajja as the basis for their decision.

The government efforts to suppress information out of Muhajja have been successful. Combined with the fact that developments in Daraa governorate already receive less international attention than those in other parts of Syria, this information suppression tactic has resulted in a veritable silence about Muhajja, even in pro-opposition media outlets. Local authorities have reportedly been unable to get attention despite efforts to reach out to international actors such as the UN, and the opposition coalition, Etilaf. *[Note: In mid-May, local authorities in Muhajja reached a détente deal with pro-government forces, leading to a partial relaxation of access restrictions. The town did not surrender to government control or submit to forced population transfers. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation and reclassify Muhajja if necessary.]* ♦

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

This Siege Watch report – the sixth in a quarterly series compiling information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas in Syria – shows the increasing momentum in the efforts by Syrian government forces and their allies to force besieged areas to surrender and bring new areas under siege. The government and its allies remain responsible for the vast majority of long-term sieges in Syria, and all of the more than 1.3 million people trapped in “Watchlist” communities. The government is the only party in Syria that has employed sieges against civilian populations systematically across the country.

The intentional starvation of civilians, denial of access to medical care, use of internationally banned weapons, and forced displacement of civilians all amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, and have been allowed to continue with complete impunity during the February – April reporting period.

Of the nearly 880,000 people still living under siege:

- ◆ 88% of the besieged Syrians in approximately 30 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 10% 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.

- ◆ 2% of the besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate.

This quarter was marked by more forced surrenders, more population transfers, and intensified siege conditions and violence. Although Russia and other international stakeholders continued to reference a December 2016 “nationwide ceasefire,” attacks against besieged areas continued and in some cases, escalated during the reporting period. In addition to conventional munitions, including banned cluster munitions, there were reports of the repeated use of incendiary munitions as well as suspected toxic gas attacks.

Continuing a recent trend, pro-government forces broke two more multi-year truce agreements in the Damascus area, launching major military campaigns against Barzeh and Qaboun in order to force surrender agreements that result in population transfers to northern Syria. Muhajja, a community in Daraa, was added to Siege Watch monitoring efforts for the first time, as the government expanded its siege and surrender tactics to new parts of the country.

Between February and April 2017, three more besieged communities – al-Waer, Madaya, and Zabadani – surrendered to pro-government forces after periods of prolonged violence and coercion. With pressure of intensive bombardment by pro-government attacks, Russian negotiators finally pushed al-Waer to drop its demand for the release of political prisoners and begin forced population transfers. Iran and Qatar brokered a “Four Towns” deal covering Madaya and Zabadani as well as the opposition-besieged communities of Fuaa and Kefraya. Following these deals, all five communities submitted to forced population transfers, and tens of thousands of people were forcibly displaced. The transfers occurring after these deals are not considered voluntary evacuations because the populations face no choice but to surrender or die, and displaced civilians have no safeguards for return. Those displaced from areas besieged by pro-government forces were sent to increasingly overcrowded and dangerous opposition-controlled areas where humanitarian conditions are poor and the threat of violence is high.

Post-surrender communities become difficult to monitor, essentially “going dark” for the project as local reporting contacts are deported, and people who remain are cloaked under a barrier of fear, afraid to speak for fear of retribution by government and militias. One displaced Siege Watch contact described how he must speak in code with a family member still residing in one of the post-surrender districts. Others who have spoken with family still inside of post-surrender communities can ascertain only that their loved ones are doing okay, but cannot get clear details on living conditions.

This silence from post-surrender communities should raise alarm bells for human rights monitors and those concerned with civilian protection in Syria. The limited data obtained by Siege Watch from post-surrender communities indicates they face a range of treatments after pro-government forces reassert control – ranging from an uneasy version of normalcy to prolific and blatant abuses. Based on the information available to Siege Watch, civilians remaining in Wadi Barada appear to be experiencing the worst treatment of any post-surrender community, and displacement out of the area is expected to continue, although the official population transfers have ended. All of the post-surrender communities are vulnerable, traumatized, underserved, depleted of human and physical capital, and socially shattered: with a majority of the original residents displaced and often hosting large populations of IDPs.

With its complete depopulation, Zabadani joined the growing list of communities that have been removed from Siege Watch monitoring efforts because they are empty. This list includes: Darayya, Hosh al-Farah, Hosh Nasri, Zebdine, Deir Assafir, Bzeina, Harasta al-Qantara, Marj al-Sultan, Nouleh, and al-Bilaliyeh.

Few of the approximately 35 besieged communities and “Watchlist” communities were reached with UN interagency humanitarian aid convoys during the reporting period. When convoys were delivered they were generally insufficient to meet the needs of the population. Medical supplies continued to be removed from aid convoys even as the medical crises deepened across all besieged areas.

The three besieged enclaves in northern Homs face a growing water crisis. Local Councils in these areas – not recognized as besieged in official UN reporting – have not been able to rally the support and attention they need from international actors to tackle the crisis, and are increasingly unable to provide water for drinking or irrigation to support an estimated 260,000 people. The situation will become increasingly dangerous with the onset of summer if it is not addressed.

Deir Ezzor city was reclassified to a Tier 2 siege as a result of declining humanitarian conditions, particularly in the Harabesh neighborhood. While WFP aid airdrops continued throughout the reporting period they no longer reach Harabesh, where the lack of access to food and medical supplies has reached a critical point for trapped civilians.

Currently, all indications suggest that the trends will indeed continue in the coming period, and the nearly 880,000 people still trapped in besieged areas will be faced with the choice to either surrender to abusive forced surrender terms and partial population transfers, or resist and face complete destruction and depopulation. Both of these paths entail continued suffering and persecution for thousands of Syrian men, women, and children. The forced surrender agreements being imposed on besieged and embattled areas are creating new grievances and exacerbating civilian suffering.

Accordingly, while the number of besieged communities has decreased, it is not a sign of positive progress. None of the sieges were lifted through diplomatic means that could support a sustainable path to peace. Instead, the forced surrenders and population transfers imposed on besieged communities are creating new grievances and undermining future peace and reconciliation initiatives.

Violations of International Law

The siege and surrender strategy being carried out by the Syrian government and its allies against civilians amounts to a widespread collective punishment strategy. Tactics including the restriction of civilian access to water, food, medicine and other materials necessary for survival; the use of chemical weapons;⁵⁹ and intentional attacks on hospitals⁶⁰ all violate tenets

59 OHCHR legal note, “Indiscriminate Attacks and Indiscriminate Weapons in International Humanitarian Law,” March 2016, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

60 OHCHR legal note, “Transfer of the Civilian Population in International Law – January 2017,” <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL).⁶¹ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has recommended that even though the Syrian conflict is classified as a non-international armed conflict, the intentional civilian starvation of civilians and the consequences of this starvation do amount to war crimes, and should be prosecuted as such.⁶²

The Siege Watch project has repeatedly documented the forced displacement of civilians from besieged areas that surrender to the Syrian government. In the report entitled “No Return to Homs,” The Syria Institute and PAX have further detailed how tactics like targeted property destruction, massacres, and arrest campaigns are also used to intentionally and forcibly displace civilians from besieged areas, and how barriers are created to prevent their return.⁶³ IHL clearly prohibits the sort of forced displacement of civilians that is being systematically and strategically undertaken from besieged areas.⁶⁴ In its recent report on the destruction of eastern Aleppo, the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry report confirmed that these forced displacements indeed constitute war crimes.⁶⁵

All of these violations of international law in Syria likely rise to the level of crimes against humanity, as they are being committed as part of a widespread and systematic strategy by Syrian pro-government forces.

UN Siege Reporting

When Siege Watch first began monitoring besieged locations in November 2015, UN OCHA dramatically underestimated the size and scope of the sieges. Its official estimates – the ones included in the UNSG’s mandated monthly reporting to the Security Council – included around 1/3 of the people living under siege in Syria and failed to recognize a number of long-term sieges in Homs, Damascus, and Rural Damascus governorates. Since the start of Siege Watch reporting, UN OCHA has increased its population estimates and expanded the number of designated besieged areas, gradually bringing its assessments more in line with Siege Watch findings. PAX and The Syria Institute welcome these improvements, but they are not enough.

Near the end of the reporting period in April 2017, the UN reporting estimated a total of 624,500 people living in besieged areas.⁶⁶ This figure still falls short of nearly 880,000 currently monitored by the Siege Watch project. The discrepancy will be even larger once the UN figures reflect the end of the transfer of Madaya to government control – already reflected in the Siege Watch figures. The remaining difference in reported figures comes from the communities in northern Homs and the southern Damascus suburbs that Siege Watch monitors, but which are still not officially recognized in the UN reporting.

61 OHCHR legal note, “International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare – January 2017,” <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

62 OHCHR, “Living under Siege: The Syrian Arab Republic,” February 2014, <www.ohchr.org>; OHCHR legal note, “International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare – January 2017,” <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

63 PAX and The Syria Institute, “No Return to Homs, A case study on demographic engineering in Syria,” January 2017, <reliefweb.int>.

64 OHCHR legal note, “Transfer of the Civilian Population in International Law – January 2017,” <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

65 UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” 2 February 2017, <undocs.org>.

66 UN OCHA, “Syrian Arab Republic: Besieged communities (as at 27 Apr 2017) [EN/AR]” <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

The UN's failure to acknowledge the reality on the ground in areas like northern Homs is problematic, because this reporting plays an important role in framing the international community's understanding of the sieges, and in shaping the urgency and nature of its response. The impact is that alarm bells do not always ring quickly or loudly enough to address critical emergencies, and that a number of long-besieged communities are not being prioritized for aid delivery.

The nature of the discrepancies and unexplained changes in the figures – for example the designation of Hajar al-Aswad in late 2016 and reversal several months later – suggests that some of the designation decisions are 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. In recent months the UN monthly reporting has conflated besieged areas and hard-to-reach areas, making it more difficult than ever to follow developments in besieged communities.

Improved accuracy in the UN reporting on the besieged areas is an important and necessary step, but it must be accompanied by concrete action from the international community to lift the sieges. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the UN Security Council – not the humanitarian agencies – to restore peace and end the atrocities being committed in besieged areas.

Recommendations

The Syrian government has been emboldened not only by the military support of its allies, but also by the success of the siege strategy and the complete lack of international response to the atrocities committed therein. Until the international community takes concrete action to deter or disrupt the sieges, the same patterns of violence, destruction, and forced population transfers will be repeated time and time again. Continued failure to act while atrocities are committed with impunity in the besieged areas is not neutrality, it is complicity.

PAX and TSI therefore recommend the following measures be taken:

Political Action

- ◆ The UN Security Council must act on its commitment to enforce Resolution 2139 (2014), which called upon all parties “to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas” and threatened further steps in the case of non-compliance.⁶⁷
- ◆ International stakeholders, including the UNSC and the ISSG, must increase political pressure on besieging parties and their allies to prevent Eastern Ghouta – the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country – from becoming the next eastern Aleppo. An estimated 419,620 people are at risk.
- ◆ UN monitoring should report successful access to besieged communities rather than approvals granted, as many approved convoys never reach their destination or are subjected to crucial items being removed from the load.

67 UN Security Council, "Resolution 2139 (2014)," S/RES/2139, 22 February 2014, <undocs.org>.

- ◆ The UN should not consider receiving approvals for aid delivery as equivalent to receiving “access,” so long as the approving party hinders delivery through other means such as bombardments. A cessation of attacks must be considered an integral part of the granting of aid access.

Operational

- ◆ When their presence is requested by one of the parties, UN agencies should send monitors to oversee the negotiation and implementation of local forced surrender agreements. These monitors should actively discourage and condemn the practice of forced civilian transfers that are often mandated as part of these agreements. If such transfers are undertaken, the presence of international monitors can help discourage further abuses of civilians during the process, and ensure that any violations of IHL and human rights are documented.
- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into communities that have been forced to surrender to the Syrian government to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights and IHL violations. These communities include: Madaya, Khan al-Shieh, Moadamiya, Wadi Barada, al-Tal, Qudsaya, al-Hameh, and eastern Aleppo.
- ◆ UN or other humanitarian agencies should immediately begin work with local actors to address the growing water crisis in northern Homs.
- ◆ UN agencies must monitor the distribution of their aid deliveries through third-party local monitors. UN agencies and international donors should investigate continuing reports of abnormalities in aid distribution and take punitive action against parties diverting aid from civilian beneficiaries. Alternative channels for aid distribution should be explored when parties are found to be misusing international assistance.
- ◆ Idlib governorate has become a ticking time bomb as a result of the influx of forcibly displaced persons. International action is needed both to meet current needs in the area, and to prepare for several possible scenarios that could create conflict and humanitarian catastrophes:
 - UN agencies and relief organizations operating out of Turkey should act urgently and increase aid in order to meet the current humanitarian needs of both IDPs and host communities.
 - UN agencies and relief organizations operating out of Turkey must be prepared for a potential influx of tens of thousands of additional IDPs, which is a likely scenario if the besieged Eastern Ghouta enclave surrenders to forced population transfers.

- UN agencies and relief organizations operating out of Turkey should prepare contingency plans for a scorched earth pro-government offensive against Idlib governorate. This scenario is possible if the Syrian government recaptures the remaining besieged enclaves in Homs and Rural Damascus and completes population transfers out of these areas to Idlib.

UN Reporting

- ◆ UN OCHA's Damascus hub should be relieved of any role in the decision-making process on siege designation given the close working relationship that the office must maintain with the Syrian government. Relevant data gathered by the Damascus hub should be sent to be analyzed in a more neutral environment where determinations will be less vulnerable to political pressure.
- ◆ UN OCHA should recognize the long-besieged communities of the northern Homs countryside and the southern suburbs of Damascus, including Hajar al-Aswad. 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 demand increased transparency in the designation process of the besieged areas and on what aid exactly reached the communities in need. Consistency and transparency will help ensure that UN reporting is not being manipulated towards political or military ends.

Accountability

- ◆ Governments and intergovernmental bodies should acknowledge and condemn the war crimes and crimes against humanity that are committed in the context of sieges, including the population transfers, which amount to forced civilian displacement.
- ◆ War crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of the siege strategy must be investigated and documented so that those responsible can be held accountable. This includes the actions of Syrian government allies of Russia and Iran as well as non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, which have played a central role establishing and enforcing most of the sieges in the country.

- ◆ As part of the accountability mechanism established in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248 of 21 December 2016, resources must be allocated to ensure cases are prepared on war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of sieges, such as starvation and forced population transfers.⁶⁸ ◆

⁶⁸ UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248, "International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011," A/71/L.48, 21 December 2016.

Annex – Community Lists & Population Data

Table of Siege Watch
Besieged Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
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.	60,000
	Zamalka	2	Syrian Govt.	14,850
	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.	16,750
	Jisreen	2	Syrian Govt.	19,395
	Kafr Batna	2	Syrian Govt.	30,000
	Saqba	2	Syrian Govt.	19,000
	Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000

	Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	20,000
	Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	16,500
	Douma	1	Syrian Govt.	138,400
	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.	8,750
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	40,000
	Autaya	2	Syrian Govt.	1,000
	Beit Naim	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Nashabiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	1,500
	Al-Salhiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
Deir ez-Zor	Deir Ezzor	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	72,000
Homs	Al-Waer	1	Syrian Govt.	46,900
	Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Govt.	75,000
	Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
	Talbiseh	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
Idlib	Fuaa	3	Armed groups	} 10,800
	Kafraya	3	Armed groups	
Total				879,320

Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of April 2017.

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

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	81,725
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	40,000
	Qaboun	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	?
Daraa	Muhajja	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	25,000
Rural	Moadamiyet al-Sham	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	41,000
Damascus	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.	6,000
	Al-Tal	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	850,000
	Madaya + Baqeen	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.+ Hezbollah	41,000
Total				1,369,725

Table of Depopulated Communities

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Formerly Besieged by	Date of Capture
Rural Damascus	Zabadani	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	April 2017
	Darayya	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	August 2016
	Hosh Nasri	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	September 2016
	Hosh al-Farah	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	July 2016
	Zebdine	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Deir Assafir	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Bzeina	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Harasta al-Qantara	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Nouleh	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Marj al-Sultan	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	January 2016
	Al-Bilaliyeh	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	January 2016

Note: This list is not exhaustive. It only includes besieged communities depopulated since Siege Watch monitoring began in late 2015. Communities such as the Old City of Homs which were depopulated earlier are not included.



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